ENTERTAINING READING FOR CHRISTMAS

ARGOSY

JANUARY, 1954
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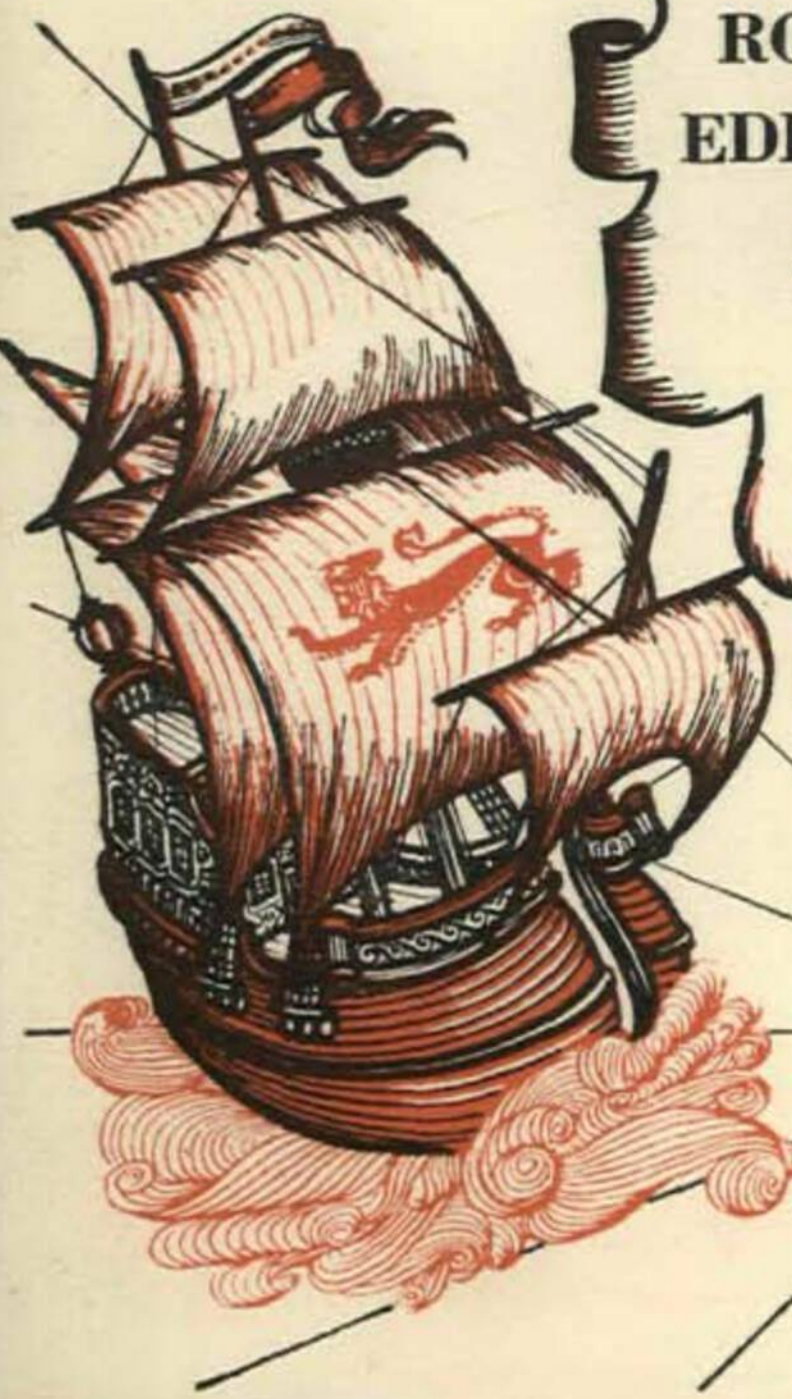

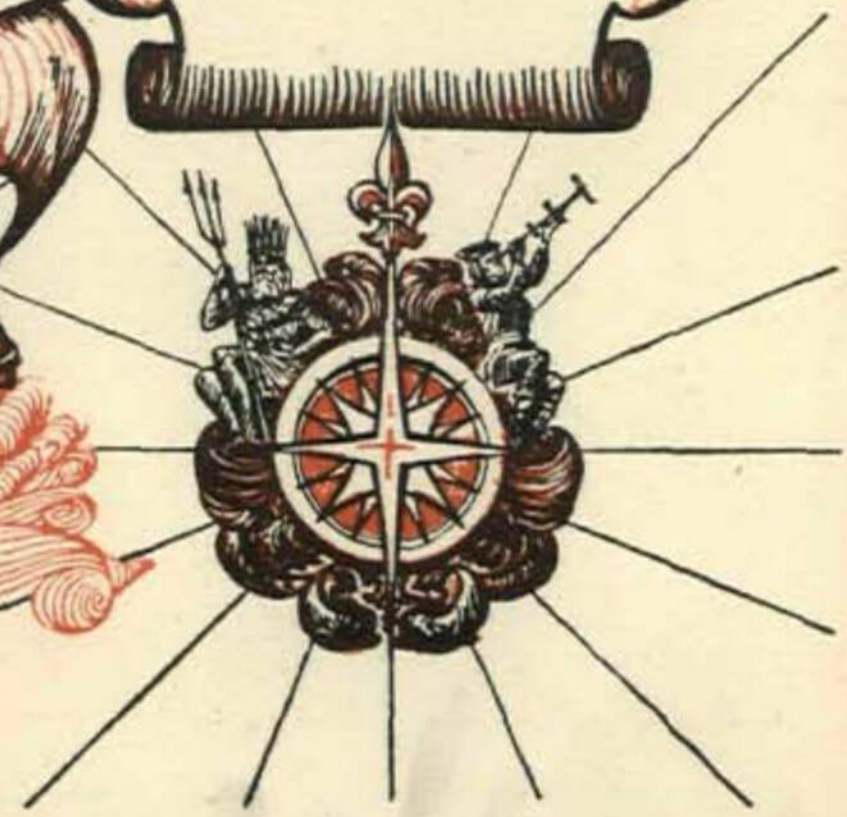

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ARGOSY

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JOY of the Angels

NOW every star that dwells in sky,
Look down with shining eyes:
The night has dropped in passing by
A Star from Paradise.
Sing sweet as the flute,
Sing clear as the horn,
Sing joy of the Stars,
Come Christmas the morn.

Now every beast that crops in field,
Breathe sweetly and adore:
The night has brought the richest yield
That ever the harvest bore.
Sing sweet as the flute,
Sing clear as the horn,
Sing joy of the Creatures,
Come Christmas the morn.

Now all the Angels of the Lord,
Rise up on Christmas Even:
The passing night will hear the Word
That is the voice of Heaven.
Sing sweet as the flute,
Sing clear as the horn,
Sing joy of the Angels,
Come Christmas the morn.

ELEANOR FARJEON

KEEPER OF CHRISTMAS

**Bright colours whirled together,
humming magically**

by EDITH MACWHIRTER

AMONG those who kept Christmas in the Himalayan town below the snows was Timpoo the rickshaw-wallah, who was a Bhutia and a good Buddhist. Always before Christmas he would clean and refurbish his rickshaw, replace its soiled cushions, re-enamel its hood and apron, and polish up its twin lamps until their brass and glass gleamed as brightly by day as their flames glowed by night.

Then he would festoon a bright Christmas garland across the front of the hood, fasten his best pink silk tassel to his pigtail, put on his festive hat with its gold brocade and its fur wings, and surprise all the fares he carried by wishing them a Merry Christmas. And when the great day itself finally arrived, he would leave his rickshaw idle on the stand, and take a solemn holiday.

If he were asked, as he was every year, why he, a good Buddhist, observed the Christian festival, he would only smile and look away across the deep bowl of the town to the distant sparkling snows, and smile again and forget to answer; for at Christmas-time he ceased to be Timpoo the grown-up rickshaw owner, and became instead, Timpoo the eight-year-old son of Kintup the Everest porter.

At eight years old he had been a bare-legged boy in a brief striped robe—a boy with round crimson cheeks, a thick cap of straight black hair, and bright slanting dark eyes. He had been fresh then from his remote upland home, and strange to the bewildering ways of the Himalayan town, where he and his mother were to live whilst his father made the hazardous journey to the snows with the white men.

But when eventually the white men had come back again from the snow hills, and with them all the other porters, Kintup the father of Timpoo had not been there. He had been lost on the way home, they were told: he had vanished mysteriously only three nights' march from the town, and no one knew the full truth of the matter.

The white men said it was a bear that had taken him; but his brother porters said it was not so—no bear would ever have got

the better of Kintup—it was not a bear but a dark spirit who had stolen him away. Had they not all heard it crying round their camp that very evening for the warmth of living blood?

But down in the bazaar they were saying that it was the great snow apes that had caught him. They wanted him because he was a good and kindly man; and they would shut him up in their secret caves, and feed him on water and little strong insects, until he became holier and wiser than any other living being; and then perhaps one day they would let him go free, one day...

But Timpoo's mother said Timpoo's father would never return, because it was the hill gods who had taken him. They were jealous of their snowy sanctuaries, and angry with Kintup who had climbed higher than the rest of the porters into their sacred abodes.

"Ai! Ai!" she mourned, "it is the hill gods who have seized him, and he will not come again." And she threw her apron over her head and wept. But Timpoo knew that in her heart she still hoped, for every sunrise since the news had come to them, she had visited the holy man beneath the Buddhist prayer-flags at the shrine on the hilltop. Every morning she had taken what rice and fruit and money she could scrape together in order that he might turn his prayer-wheel for her, and approach and appease the angry hill gods, and so fetch Timpoo's father home again.

And twice in the evenings she had let her neighbours bring the jaddhu-wallah—the sorcerer—to her one-roomed home on the hill above the great hotel where she had found gardener's work. At his command she had set out fiery drink, pig bristles, a chicken, and a looking-glass, and laid an old coat of her husband's on the floor. Then she had come out to sit with Timpoo in the icy starlight, while the voice of the jaddhu-wallah rose and fell inside the hut, as he worked his way through his incantations and the magic ritual, which together were to bring Kintup home again.

But Kintup did not come back again, and each new day went sadly by in Timpoo's home. At night his mother's dull-eyed resignation would give place to lamentation and despair; and the sound of her weeping would waken him many times from his sleep, and make him long to be able to comfort her. Surely, there was something he could do to bring his father back again! But his mother only shook her head, and said if the gods were unwilling, what could an eight-year-old boy do?

Timpoo was not satisfied with such an answer. He began to think about going out himself to seek his father in the hills; and

it was while he was considering in which direction he should begin his search, that he first noticed preparations for a great festival were afoot in the town. He asked his mother what puja this was that came with so many bright splendours? But his mother could only shake her head in ignorance; she had no room in her sad thoughts for talk of festivals.

It was the other gardener-women, who had worked long years at the hotel, who told him all they knew of Christmas; and they let him go with them to help cut the big tree. They described how the tree would be taken into the great hall, and planted there in a large tub, so that puja offerings could be hung on all its branches, and little holy lights set amid its leaves.

Then, on the evening before the great day itself, they told him, all the Christian children in the town would come to the hotel and gather about the lighted tree for a great celebration. And their Christmas god would then descend and visit them there. Indeed, such happenings were true, for had not they themselves seen this god enter the door in other years?

Timpoo listened narrow-eyed to the tales of such wonders; and when he lay down to sleep that night, his mind was almost as much occupied with thoughts of the coming Christian festivities, as it was with thoughts of his lost father and of his mother's unhappiness.

He was out early next day helping to cut sprays of scarlet poinsettias and to carry in green cryptomeria boughs to decorate the great hall where the festive tree now stood. All the time he worked he asked more and more questions about the coming visit of the Christmas god. And all the time that he was asking questions and being laughed at for his curiosity, his mind was busily shaping a plan—a startling and frightening plan—which might give his mother back her happiness and bring his father home again.

The threshold, he decided, was the most likely place to meet a god. Had the gardener-women not said that they had seen him entering the door? So in the late afternoon, when the dying sunlight was rosy on the snows, and the lamps were beginning to twinkle down the hillside, and the blue dusk was filling the far corners of the town, Timpoo's eager slanting eyes were peering watchfully through the clustering leaves of his hiding-place beside the hotel door.

He knew him at once when he saw him in the distance coming up the shadowy drive. He was old and white-bearded, and he wore a long red robe and a high pointed cap, such as only lamas and holy men wear. And snow lay thick on his clothing, which was as it should be, for had he not journeyed from the abode of

the gods in the high white mountains? There could be no possible mistake—this was, indeed, the Christmas god.

So Timpoo stepped timidly from his hiding-place and moved down the drive to approach the oncoming visitant, as he would approach his own deity, with a heart full of fear and humility and terrified respect, and an offering of sweetmeats, oranges, a two-anna piece, and a bright marigold garland, in his hands.

At first the red-robed god did not seem to listen to Timpoo's breathless prayer—he seemed intent on brushing the boy aside and getting on his way. But as the piping voice spoke out again in quavering anxiety, his impatience faded. He stopped and set down the heavy, bulging sack that he was carrying, accepted the offering the boy was still holding out to him, and bade him repeat his words.

Timpoo, still shaking in voice and knee, at this encounter with so powerful a deity, lifted his frightened brown eyes to the firm blue eyes of the Christmas god, and made his request again.

The god stroked his long beard as he listened; and Timpoo saw how strong and pink his hand was against the pale silver of the thick, flowing hair. Then the great snowy beard parted. The god smiled: he stretched out the large pink hand, patted Timpoo's small dark head, and spoke words of encouragement and consolation to him, assuring him that doubtless his prayers would in time be answered, that his father would surely return.

On hearing such tidings, Timpoo was so overwhelmed with happiness and gratitude, that he bowed low at the hem of the scarlet robe; and so doing, he did not see that the Christmas god had opened his bulging sack and drawn out a gaily-coloured metal cone.

When it was thrust into his hands he gazed at it with bewilderment, holding it reverently as if it were a holy charm, until the Christmas god took it from him again, and bidding Timpoo watch, stooped down and showed him how by a pressure of the fingers, the metal top would spin and spin, humming softly and magically to itself as it whirled its bright colours together.

Immediately Timpoo understood. Was this not a new kind of prayer-wheel, such as all holy men turned constantly to carry their prayers more strongly to the gods? And were not the coloured signs displayed on it, symbols of lucky diagrams, such as were found on all charms and charts, and in all holy Buddhist buildings? And was not the great Christmas god showing him how he must pray to achieve his father's return?

All this Timpoo comprehended in a flash. As the spinning cone slackened speed, he stretched out his small brown hand and set the prayer whirling again; but when he looked up

from his praying-wheel, he saw that the red-robed figure was no longer beside him. He was alone on the darkening drive.

His heart was full of excitement as he hurried home, for now he knew what he must do to bring his father back again.

When night had settled on their little hut and his mother slept, sad-faced, beside him, he rose cautiously and crept out on to the cold hillside to spin the holy charm in sight of the great snows, in order that his prayers might go winging direct from the wheel whirling on the ground before him to the gods in their white mountain abode.

At first the town sparkled companionably about him in a jewelling of lights; and above him the snow hills glimmered silver-pale across the sky. But as the lights died one by one from the hillside and the stars gleamed out above, the silver radiance of the snows seemed to dominate his world. Rhythmically his small hand went out to the spinning top—out and back, it went, out and back—keeping the prayer turning as the night settled coldly to frost.

The first jackals cried on the hillside around him: below him the last rickshaws went ringing homeward down the steep terraces: from the church on the hill above him, exultant singing voices claimed the night and, carolling for a joyous hour, died to silence again. But nothing had reality in Timpoo's world, except the ceaseless, spinning circle of his prayer to the Christmas god.

Slowly the stars moved through the Christmas night towards their most glorious stations, until at last they reached their full hour of hope and enchantment, of miracles and promised salvation. And through their bright triumph, the metal top spun on.

Out and back, went the small brown hand, out and back; and the prayer hummed up to the snows, and the colours of the lucky diagram whirled ceaseless magic together—out and back, out and back—until the stars above and the town below and the snows themselves seemed to be whirling too at the insistence of Timpoo's long prayer. Out and back . . . out . . . and . . .

He wakened with the pealing of the Christmas bells—wakened stiff and startled and ashamed of his sleep, and immediately he set the wheel spinning again. Only when he saw that dawn was near, did he stretch his chilled, cramped limbs and make for home. But if his body trembled and chattered with the cold, his heart burned warmly with contentment and happy expectation. The Christmas god would surely be gratified by almost a whole night of prayer! Surely now he would set his powerful charms to work without further pause!

Very cautiously Timpoo crept back into the hut. His mother still slept. Chilled and exhausted, he curled up beside her. Soon, he knew, soon now his father would be home; and the knowledge was warm and comforting, bringing immediate sleep.

The first face he saw when he wakened to high morning was his father's face. It was thin and lined and wind-bitten, but it was his father's face smiling at him in the way he'd always remembered. His mother was smiling, too, smiling and singing and making a great to-do with cooking pots. There was a fine savoury smell that delighted Timpoo's small stomach, and was a fitting beginning to a day of great rejoicing—a day on which the merry faces, joyous singing voices and pealing bells of the town, seemed to be celebrating not only the Christmas puja but Timpoo's family reunion.

Timpoo's mother said it was the holy man below the Buddhist prayer-flags who had brought Kintup safely back again. Timpoo's neighbours said it was the jaddhu-wallah they had engaged who was responsible for restoring him to life. Timpoo's father said they must thank the Nepal family, who had rescued him from his fall and cared for him until his leg was strong enough to carry him back again. But Timpoo knew better.

He smiled to himself, and he set his new charm spinning in a long and grateful prayer; and he vowed a solemn vow to himself always to celebrate the day of the red-coated, white-bearded, blue-eyed Christmas god who had come so generously to his aid.

★ ★ ★

DOUBLE CROTCHET

For a while a bitter feud raged between Giacomo Puccini and Arturo Toscanini. It was Giacomo's habit to send gifts of holiday bread, called *panettone*, to his friends at Christmas. He would make out a list and send it to his baker, or else simply tell the baker to send the *panettoni* to the people who got them the previous year. One Christmas, when the feud with Toscanini was raging bitterly, he was reminded that he had forgotten to strike the conductor's name from the list. Giacomo was chagrined. He tried to countermand the order but the *panettone* had been sent. This was too much! He sent Toscanini a telegram: PANETTONE SENT BY MISTAKE. PUCCINI.

The reply came promptly: PANETTONE EATEN BY MISTAKE. TOSCANINI.

DANTE DEL FIORENTINO, *Immortal Bohemian*

LOVE TEST

We permit you three months in which to choose

by ROBERT FONTAINE

ONCE upon a time (if you'll forgive me), there was, in a very cosmopolitan country, a wealthy theatrical producer with three wives.

In the spring he lived in New York with Carmen, a very fiery woman with roses for lips and diamonds for eyes. In the summer he moved to Nice and lived with Lulu, a dainty Frenchwoman of wit, of whom it is enough to say that she was feminine. And then, in the autumn, there was in London a woman who had the tang of cider.

The winter Herr Guptall used for rest and reverie.

So one spring in New York Herr Guptall was visited by a representative of law and order, to whom he offered Vienna beer and a good cigar.

"Something is, please, wrong?" said Herr Guptall.

"You have three wives, I understand?"

"Yes. Three. All nice."

"My compliments. However, it is my painful duty to tell you such an operation is against the law in this country."

"They not being, please, in this country," said the producer, who could be—and nearly always was—violent in his own language, but was forced by lack of vocabulary to be meek in English.

"It doesn't matter. Moral turpitude and all that. One of them lives in New York. Mrs. Carmen Guptall."

"Ah, Carmen!" Herr Guptall sighed. "Fortunately, she is out at the moment. She would upset herself hearing this. I, myself, please, am confused. We are all so happy, no?"

"It is against the law to be happy by this method."

"Now they tell you how to be happy!"

"By rights you should be arrested. But we know your reputation. You have added immeasurably to American culture by your production of, for example, *La Bohème* on roller skates. We owe you a debt. So we permit you three months in which to choose one wife and divorce the others. Or get rid of them some way."

" Ah," said Herr Guptall, " for me the buttered side is falling down now."

Herr Guptall thought a long while. He encased himself in a heavy silk dressing-gown, provided himself with Spanish sherry, and puffed on Perfectos for an hour. Then there came to him the thought of Solemn Gottsshook, a philosopher of international repute and a dear friend. In a few minutes the producer was on his way to Gottsshook's modest apartment in the Bronx.

Guptall was greeted like the old friend he was. The philosopher hugged him, patted his bald head, and offered him some plum wine and sugar cakes.

After some small talk Guptall explained his situation. Solemn Gottsshook was impressed. " You have come a long way since your mother used to frighten you with her scolding."

" Now nobody frightens me with scolding."

" So, the problem is which one to keep, no ? "

" This is the problem, yes. Carmen, Lulu, Dorothy. I am so fond of all three."

The philosopher pondered. " I have a plan to find out which one loves you the best. Go to each and tell her that you are married to three women. Listen to the reaction of each. Come back and tell me. I shall pick one for you to keep."

The producer thanked his old friend, saying, " In this world where the buttered side falls always on the ground, it is good to have a friend."

" Likewise," said the philosopher.

While the whole idea worried him a little, Guptall went to London, and to Dorothy. He found her at a cricket-match, drinking tea with a ruddy young Oxonian about seven feet tall. She was rather surprised to see her husband.

" Cheer-o," she said dully. " Didn't expect you this time of year."

" Important business. I must speak to you alone."

" Quite," said Dorothy. She made her apologies to the Oxonian and left with her husband. They sat down in a tea shoppe and over some scones the producer hesitantly told her the story.

When he was done, his wife smiled pleasantly. " A bit of an eye-opener, you know, Gupty. Quite. But, darling, we've got along so well, why spoil it ? I'm really not at all upset. In fact I can't quite say I mind. I suppose I should, horribly, if I knew them. But I don't. Or do I ? Not the Duchess of Maldroppe ? I couldn't bear that. I'm so keen on cricket and she abhors it."

"No one," said Guptall, "that you know. I have that much decency."

"You have a lot more, dear. Just keep sending me the cheques and forget all about it."

Very relieved, Guptall took a plane to Nice, where he found Lulu gambling with an Argentinian with the curious name of Fabula. Lulu was nervous about running into her husband and introduced the Argentinian as her cousin.

"I didn't know that you had South American blood, my dear Lulu," said the producer.

"Oh, for a long time I have had eet," said Lulu. "Eh, cousin Fabula?"

"*Si*," said Fabula, bowing from the waist and putting five thousand francs on number 17.

"I must speak to you alone," Guptall said. He led her to a table and over a mild glass of vin rosé he told her the story. Lulu chuckled. "Ooh, you rascal man, you. Who would theenk, eh? You make for me yourself sooo much more attracteef! Is that the idea, eh? Ha, ha!"

"No. It's just that I can spend so little time in Nice . . ."

"Ah, so leetle time . . . but so well spent . . . Nevaire before has so much been done in so leetle time, eh, Peachy?"

Guptall blushed.

Lulu looked at the diamond-studded watch Guptall had given her. "It is necessary for me to rush now, Peachy. Do not worry yourself about thees. I love you madly. Send always the cheques and little gifts and we will forget it, eh?"

"You are so understanding," said Guptall.

"Ah, why not, with such an understanding 'usband, eh?"

So it was not long before Guptall was back in New York with only Carmen to face. He took her to an elegant club on the East Side and after she had consumed seven or eight glasses of tequilla he said to her what he had said to the others.

Carmen rose, her eyes afire. She slapped his face five or six times and then poured a glass of iced water over him to wake him up. Then she slapped him some more. The head waiter and the owner appeared and she slapped them, too, one with each hand. Finally the air cleared, and Mr. Guptall and his wife were in their limousine, riding round Central Park.

"I hate them. I weel keel them!" Carmen cried. "I hate you, too. But I weel not keel you. I weel keel you weeth love only. For you I am mad with passionates! I scratch out their eyes! I tear their hair."

She went on like this until, at last, they went home and to bed, and she stopped for a while.

The next day, tired and confused, Guptall told the philosopher what had happened.

The philosopher pondered for a long time. " You give me a big responsibility. But I advise you to keep Carmen. She alone was jealous of the others, threatened them. She loves you truly. Divorce the others. Keep Carmen."

Guptall agreed, and at the end of a few months he was, by paying considerable money and pulling a number of wires, free of Dorothy and Lulu.

At the end of a year, a worn Guptall was back at the home of Solemn Gottsshook. "You look bad, my friend," said the philosopher.

" I feel bad. My production of *Aïda* on ice is a failure. But more than that, I am not happy with one wife. She follows me everywhere. I see her every day. There is no change. Only this love, love, love. It is monotonous."

The philosopher smiled sadly. " I know. I am married, too."

" Then why did you advise Carmen ? "

" Ah well, you agreed you wanted love. So I advised you to keep Carmen. If it was happiness you wanted I should have advised you to get rid of all three of them."

★ ★ ★

STORY OF THE FILM

Gladys Cooper has always been content to learn the lines of her part, without having a clue as to what the part has to do with the story. And having seen hardly any of her own films she is nowadays quite interested to hear what they were all about.

" How good you were, Gladys," you say to her, mentioning a particular picture. " That bit where you tell your daughter's suitor to leave the house at once and never return to it again."

" You know," says Miss Cooper, " I've sometimes wondered why I asked him to leave the house. What was the matter with him ? Wasn't he a nice man ? " You begin to tell her the story and she begins to get quite interested. " I see . . . It's rather good, isn't it ? I must see the film sometime."

SEWELL STOKES, *Without Veils : The Intimate Biography of Gladys Cooper*

PEACOCK PIE

The night had been too full of excitement for an old bird

by D. WILSON MacARTHUR

HENNERY woke up.

An insistent challenge hammered in his ears, penetrated the mists of sleep, and began to rouse a fury that had lately been often roused. With a jerk he withdrew his head from beneath his wing, stretched his neck, and rose on his thin strong legs as he balanced on the branch that for years had been his favourite perch.

The cry rang out again, echoing through the trees, over the lawns, down to the river that had already caught the first faint pallor of the coming dawn.

"Help! He-e-elp! He-e-e-elp!"

It was not merely a routine reveille. It was a studied insult, a challenge deliberate and peremptory.

Hennery, his eyes kindling, turned on his perch and through the faint greyness of the dawn's beginning stared across to the neighbouring trees and a dark shape that, an exact counterpart of himself when young, now gave tongue with stretched neck and stiff reaching legs and body delicately poised, rocking a little backwards and forwards in an ecstasy of adolescent vanity.

There were stirrings in the shadowed foliage. Sleepy voices made little chirping sounds, querulous or preoccupied, and Hennery distinguished the round dark shapes among the branches. His wife Hester, still sound asleep beside him—and no one else upon his favourite tree. Now he and Hester had it to themselves.

His eyes, rheumy and blinking, peered angrily through the growing light, and the blood pounded in his head as he puffed out his chest, as his throat swelled and swelled and with a shattering strength of lung he proclaimed his own strident challenge to the dawn.

"Help! He-e-elp! He-e-e-e-elp!"

The young voice mingled with his own, a discordant clamour. Somewhere a window slammed and a voice—he knew it for the voice of The Woman—grumbled.

"These wretched birds . . ."

Hennery recovered his breath. He glared at his son, and very

slowly, very deliberately began walking along the branch towards the great gnarled trunk of the tree. Stately and dignified, he walked down it; and, a dozen yards away, his son imitated him, but with less dignity, more haste—a haste inspired by an abounding new self-assurance and an overweening conceit.

They reached the ground at the identical moment.

For years Hennery and Hester had lived alone. They had enjoyed the complete freedom of their surroundings, a spacious world in which no danger lurked so long as daylight lasted and in which there was ample choice of a secure and lofty roost when darkness came. They went where they pleased, Hennery trailing his long fan behind him, Hester following dutifully in his wake; and they gravitated, during the warm dry afternoons, towards the front lawn so as to arrive precisely as The Woman appeared, bearing a tray.

Shortly after, The Man would follow, tall, silver-haired, stooping a little more each time the warm days came round again, and seat himself beside the rustic table on which The Woman had placed her tray.

Then Hennery and Hester would approach and The Man would speak. "Well, Hennery. So there you are again. I declare you know the time of day better than my old grandfather clock."

And he would give them cake.

When the colder weather came, this cake ritual would be discontinued, and Hennery and Hester would abandon their tree in favour of a perch in the rafters of the great old coach-house. But there was perennial delight in the return of the warmer weather, particularly as by then Hennery would have got over a disinclination for society, and the long feathers with their gleaming kaleidoscopic sprays would have grown so far that a shivering ecstasy would begin to quiver through him.

Hennery then spent longer and longer at his toilette. He would spread the strong russet-brown pinions of his wings and stretch them out and down in graceful fans; he would preen the gleaming blue feathers of his breast and neck, and twist his head to smooth out the speckled canopy upon his back, and the vivid green would be visible again between his shoulder blades, which was the start of his annual period of glory and of pride. Soon the fan would sprout, growing longer and longer until it lay on top of his tail, and reached beyond his tail, and at last trailed its shining beauty upon the ground.

Hester, meantime, would continue to behave in her prosaic,

matter-of-fact way; but Hennery would be aware of a new look in her eyes, stealing surreptitious glances at him; and one day a surge of warm, vibrant, vital emotion would sweep over him and the pride of his dominant masculinity would be reborn. He would turn slowly on his toes, holding his disdainful head high, and then, with a graceful pirouette, he would set his pinions quivering and rustling, and with a great shiver his glory would be revealed.

The long trailing fan would be raised aloft and spread, glittering and luminous, before Hester's wifely eyes; and although for a day or two she might appear indifferent, in the end she acknowledged his advances and would begin to invite him to intimacy. Hennery, however, was not to be hurried—he knew Hester's irritating little habit of turning suddenly away and going on eating—and he would continue the display until Hester could bear the suspense no longer and would blatantly reciprocate his advances, as if wondering why he had to make so protracted a business of these preliminaries.

A while later Hester would go queer. She would slip away from him and he would not see her again for hours, and after many days of this she would not reappear at all. Darkness would come down and Hennery would be alone on his branch. He would call and call, not the long sonorous notes of his ceremonial Last Post but shorter, sharper, more urgent notes; and the echoes would die, there would be little stirrings among the treetops and down in the grass, then silence.

Somewhere, far off, an owl would hoot. Somewhere a fox would give its short sharp yelp. Somewhere a rabbit would scream in its last agony.

And Hester would not come.

In the morning he would set out to look for her—not directly, of course, for Hennery put first things first—but as an incidental to breakfast; and in the end he would find her.

She would be in some deep thicket upon a nest she had made for herself. They would stare at each other for a long moment. Hester's eyes would have a reddish glow, her face would be flushed and swollen, and her body would look as if it had been flattened and broadened. The little pert blue comb perched on top of her head would quiver at sight of him, she would crouch lower still, and fluff out her feathers, and glare, and dare him to move a single inch nearer; whereupon Hennery would turn and stroll away.

After some weeks Hester would be back, irritable, fussy, and temperamental, and her absence was never explained. It remained, for years, a mystery to Hennery, but a mystery that

hardly affected the idyll of his existence. He had The Man, he had his cake, he had Hester and his favourite perch.

He had no reason to suspect that life could be otherwise.

One day at tea-time The Man looked at Hennery with stern eyes.

"Hennery," he announced, "I've plans for you. You and Hester are going to earn your living. For years Hester has been laying eggs and sitting on them and always they have been stolen. So—no chicks. I'm not blaming you, Hennery. Not your fault. But from now on you're going to be a father. The father of the fat, bouncing peafowl that will furnish forth the festive board for your lord and master. I want chicks, Hennery. Plenty of chicks. You understand, Hennery? Have a bun."

Hennery ate two buns.

Next time Hester was in one of her moods Hennery found The Man with her. He was building a wigwam of stakes and grass in the midst of which, frantic with terror and rage, sat Hester. He placed food and water beside her, and unrolled some wire netting all round her which, Hennery discovered indignantly, prevented him from getting at these titbits. Hennery went off in a huff, and did not see Hester again for weeks. Then he met her on one of the paths.

Eight small brown objects darted and leapt and ran close behind her; and Hester was not pleased to see Hennery; but by the end of the day Hennery had accepted the new-comers and the new-comers and Hester had accepted Hennery.

Thereafter the pattern of life changed swiftly. By the time Hester had her next brood there were six fully-grown hens and two handsome young cocks to share the gardens, and in due course there were peafowl everywhere, and peacocks almost as large, almost as beautiful as Hennery himself. Occasionally The Woman would pick up a young peahen and carry it off, to be seen no more; but nobody noticed that.

As the flock grew, Hennery, its acknowledged overlord, began to discover an inclination to sit down more often, to waken a little later, to spread his fan more from habit than to arouse an emotion he felt less and less disposed to reciprocate; and then came the day when he found himself face to face with one of his own offspring, and the pair, strutting and spreading their fans with a great shivering rattle of quills, glared at each other and stepped closer, breathing hard, until the youngster, flinching at last, turned tail and sidled off. From that moment Hennery knew that a crisis was approaching; and now it had come.

The young cock had usurped the prerogative that had always

been Hennery's, and had bugled the hour that promised the rising of the sun.

Hennery braced himself. Indignation and a feeling of outrage gave him strength. The youngster walked up and down, almost on tiptoe, in front of Hennery, defiant and cocksure. Red fury surged in Hennery's brain and he launched himself forward with a great spring.

His curved beak lashed out. A moment later feathers flew. It did not last long.

Hennery was old; but he was heavy, he was strong. The youngster, squawking harshly, turned and fled, sprinting away on his long spindle-shanks.

After that Hennery knew that the easy pleasant days were over. There was a look in the eyes of the other cocks—a look that said plainly that their day was coming; and as for the hens . . . Hennery, spreading his fan deliberately, spread it in vain. First one, then another turned glassy indifferent eyes upon him and went on eating.

One night, when he clambered to his perch, he looked down in vain for Hester, who should have been dutifully following. He called; Hester did not come.

In the morning he sought her deliberately. But Hester ignored his stately pirouette, the insistent urgent quivering of quills; when he became too insistent, she skipped aside and strolled away, and Hennery, watching with bewildered, baneful eyes, saw that she sidled over towards the brash young cock he had thrashed, and the pair of them, together, drifted off into the shrubberies.

Hennery spent a solitary day.

Tea-time came. The cake ritual had been adopted by the whole flock, and a pretty sight they made on the well-mown lawn.

"Hullo, Hennery," The Man said. "Aren't you coming over?"

Hennery saw the outstretched hand and shouldered his way through the crowd to receive his due. But soon he was jostled aside and a young cock snatched the titbit from under his very beak.

"Hennery, Hennery," The Man said. "You're losing your grip. Must be getting old, Hennery. Like me. And old people are redundant in this modern world."

Hennery stared into The Man's old kindly eyes. His own were hooded, his manner was still haughty but there was sadness too, the inexpugnable sadness of age. Slowly, he retired from the scene and sought the solitude of the shrubberies.

He bore the new situation for several weeks. But they were terrible weeks. Six separate times he fought a savage duel. He won three, he lost the others; and, the glorious blue of his chest stained red where a spur had stabbed through, his feathers bedraggled, even his fan torn and deep gashes showing on head and neck, he avoided further combat.

Then came the crowning humiliation.

Hennery, staying up late one night to avoid any encounter so near bedtime, made for his tree, and stopped dead. His perch was occupied. He walked away sadly towards a solitary sycamore.

In the morning, which he forgot to greet, he was last to leave his perch. Often from the bushes he caught sight of the flock; he would have liked to mingle with them, but the most he dared do was to tag along behind, pretending—to himself as much as to them—that he was still of them. But by the end of the day he knew himself an outcast.

When twilight came he did not go near the peacock grove. Instead he took a path that led to a rustic gate, flanked by the boundary fence. He sprang on top of the gate and poised there, rocking a little backwards and forwards.

It was a symbolic moment. He stared out over the wide pastures towards a distant grove of trees near the river. He turned his head and looked back along the path, and in the far distance he could see one of the tall pointed gables of the great house. Then he leapt down and walked swiftly through the long grass to the distant trees.

He flew up to a high branch. He threw back his head, his eyes lost focus, his throat swelled, and Hennery gave tongue.

"Help! He-e-elp! He-e-e-elp!"

The clarion call echoed among the treetops, soared out over the river, sped back to the distant house. It was answered, by a chorus of yelps and strident shouts, but to Hennery these far-off wailing sounds brought no warm sense of companionship. no reassurance, only an added desolation.

In the morning he came down out of his solitary tree and set off briskly.

He came to a road.

It was not like the paths and drives at home. It was hard and soon it was hot, and its dull greyness worried him, for it was utterly bare. But the hedge on either side held much of interest, and as he walked he ate.

During the next ten days Hennery's life hung often in the balance. He lived in a maze of misery and watchfulness and terror.

It was no longer safe at night, even on the highest roost.

There were silent, slinking creatures that climbed the trees like creeping shadows, and the smell of them terrified Hennery. Those gleaming evil eyes, those vicious claws that sometimes scrabbled on the tough bark, those tense faces full of hatred and the desire to kill—they became a new nightmare.

Ten days in the wilderness reduced Hennery to a state of desperation. He had reached the stage when all he sought was protection, safety, and enough to eat; some quiet corner where, in retirement, he could find a measure of contentment.

Then he saw the gate.

The gate was open. Beyond it a rough track led to a little farmhouse flanked by sheds and a tall Dutch barn. The sight of hens scrabbling about the yard drew him, and the glitter of wire—a great area enclosed in wire, with solidly-built houses inside it. Tentatively he strutted through the gateway and began to walk, warily, suspiciously, but purposefully, towards the house.

A small figure emerged from the front door, carrying a bucket. It dropped the bucket with a clatter and stared at Hennery.

"Oo, Mum! Come quick, Mum! Come and look at the lovely bird! Oo, quick, Mum! Come and look."

Hennery was ready to take to his heels. He stood staring at the little girl, quivering with suspicion and distrust, and he cast a glance all around to make sure that his retreat was secure. But the little girl went on pointing, her face radiant, and out of the cottage emerged a woman, indulgently smiling at the child.

She followed the pointing finger and gaped. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "Fancy! I wonder where it come from."

"What is it, Mum?"

"It's a peacock, that is."

"What's a peacock?"

"The toffs keep them in their gardens."

"What do they keep them for?"

"Oh, just for swank. Because they look pretty."

"Could we keep one?"

"What, and have it eating its head off for nothing? Not on your life, my girl! They're no use."

The child looked downcast. "Oh, Mum," she said plaintively, "but it's such a pretty bird. It's ever so pretty."

A heavy step rang on the cobbles and a man appeared, a thickset young man in rough clothes. "Hullo!" he said. "Where did that spring from?"

"Walked in the gate bold as brass," the woman replied.

"Pretty, eh? Wonder if it eats grain, or what. Here, Sue, you nip in and fetch a handful."

Sue reappeared with her hands cupped in front of her. She walked—a trifle hesitantly—towards Hennery, who stood his ground but was ready to retreat if need be. She held out her hands.

Hennery saw the grain and stretched out his neck.

"Oo, Mum, look! He's taking it out of my hand!" The little girl's voice was ecstatic.

"Handsome, all right," the husband commented, watching with a grin. "Must have strayed from somewheres."

"Then he better go on straying," his wife said tartly.

"Oh, I don't know. If the kid likes him . . ."

"What's the use of it? You couldn't even eat it."

"Course you could!"

"What! Eat a peacock? Go on with you, Bert Wheeler."

"Now then! You leave me know what I'm talking about, see? Peacocks is good eating. Why, they used to be what they calls the shay doovers of royal banquets, peacocks did. Look at that old guy, Wendle What's-his-name—Alf's boss."

"What about Alf's boss?"

"Alf says as the old guy starts breeding them peacocks of his and soon there's peacocks all over the ruddy place and his nibs has one for his dinner every Friday night, regular. So happen this is one of the old guy's peacocks."

"Well then, you best write and tell him."

"I will too," Bert replied.

"And what are we going to do with it now? Shut it up?"

"Leave it be. Alf says they find their own food, and it'll be all right."

Next morning Hennery, who had spent the night comfortably in a tree, surprised them by descending not on wide-stretched wings but like a cat, simply walking down the sloping trunk—and settled down to the urgent business of feeding.

The day proved full of surprises; but they were pleasant surprises.

Hennery went and inspected the fowl-runs. He came suddenly face to face with an astonishing sight—a bird far heavier than himself, with horrible wattles that swung loosely as it strutted towards him, a vicious-looking beak, and eyes that blazed at the sight of him.

It made noises at Hennery, odd, unmusical, ugly noises that he did not like, and it marched down upon him and made a lightning grab. Hennery was just in time to step back; but in half a minute he had the measure of his antagonist. He leapt forward, strúck out with one foot and was yards away in a flash. The thing came lumbering after him; but again Hennery nimbly

avoided it and struck. It hissed and gobbled and burbled at him in a most frightening manner but Hennery was, for some reason, not at all afraid. He walked away.

He came back two hours later and came face to face, again, with the turkey.

Hennery, wiser now, walked straight up to him, dodged his clumsy effort to engage him in a neck-twining match, and lashed out. One—two—swift as lightning.

That day settled once and for all Hennery's position at the farm. It also demonstrated that he was not bent on conquest. His sole concern was to secure his haven and, by demonstrating his ability in self-defence, obtain immunity from molestation.

Altogether a pleasant day, and when the late afternoon came he made his stately way to the cottage and was received by Sue and her mother with an offering of grain. No cake; but grain would do. He saw no reason to move on again.

A reply duly came to Bert's letter—a long, rambling reply.

"What does he say?" Millie demanded.

"We're to keep him. And his name's Hennery—spelt funny like."

"Oh well," said Millie.

"Oh, Mum! Isn't it marvellous?" cried Sue, skipping in youthful ecstasy. "And we're to really truly keep him? Oo, I'm glad!"

So, too, was Hennery, when in the course of the next few days it was made clear that this was now his home. It was all he wanted from life. He had reached an age when a comfortable roost, a sufficiency of food, and the freedom to become a looker-on at life were the sum of his desires.

Occasionally he would approach a hen bird and, quivering all over with the effort, raise the fan that, in spite of the loss of several feathers and the fading of its glory as the moult set in, was still, in the drab surroundings of the cottage, a shimmering scintillating thing; and the astonished hen would goggle at him, think him the oddest creature, and go on eating.

But Sue delighted in this display. So, too, when they could spare a moment, did her parents, and when friends came visiting it was quickly discovered that Hennery was prepared to oblige in return for sufficiently attractive largesse.

This, indeed, was haven at last.

For a whole month life continued in its new pattern. Then, very gradually, it too began to change.

The colder weather was coming. The family became busier and busier. They had no time to waste admiring Hennery,

especially after his glory had departed and he could no longer delight visitors with his fan. When the food dishes were taken into the poultry-runs Hennery would be unceremoniously shooed away.

"You go and look for your own food," Hennery would be told. "Can't afford to feed a great big useless bird like you. Be off with you!"

So now Hennery often went hungry; and never once did he salute the twilight or the dawn. Those days in the wilderness had made him dumb.

When the nights grew sharply colder Hennery found his perch too exposed and set about looking for better quarters. The Dutch barn offered a solution.

It was stacked high now with hay, almost to the roof, and Hennery flew up on a girder and walked along it, crouching a little, and found another girder down the middle, a few feet above the top of the hay. He walked along this and discovered that he was out of the wind, and surprisingly out of the cold.

Nobody commented on this change of quarters, probably because nobody noticed it.

That was the whole trouble.

The novelty had worn off. Hennery was no longer a source of pride to the family and wonder and envy to the visitors. Hennery, in fact, was merely one of a very large number of birds about the place.

"Reckon we may as well eat him ourselves, come Christmas," Bert told his wife one day.

"He'll be right tough, by the look of him," Millie replied. "But maybe he'd do in a pie. Me, I'd rather have turkey."

"Turkey! Not you, my girl. Turkeys are fetching too much these days. Folks'll pay anything for a bit of poultry, around Christmas."

"Then I reckon you best sharpen your teeth," said Millie.

Christmas approached.

The bare trees shivered under icy winds and there was great activity about the farm, all the birds on the move all the time, eating. Hennery found food for himself growing scarcer and scarcer. He would see the turkeys, fat and waddling, stuffed full of rich food while he grubbed around the yard, and sometimes he stood outside the netting and wistfully watched them eating.

He began to be kept awake at night, by lights from the cottage. There were frequent upsets among the poultry houses, squawking and squalling and terrified flutterings, and Bert and Millie would hurry about, carrying bundles of birds under their arms.

One afternoon a closed truck arrived and there was a great coming and going with large baskets. Hennery hung about, hoping that the visitor would notice him and offer him something.

The visitor did notice him.

"Ho!" he said. "Got a peacock, eh?"

"Yes," said Bert.

"Not much good, a peacock. I bet it makes a muck o' Millie's vegetables and that. Eating its head off."

"Oh, Hennery gets his own food. Picks it up here and there."

"Not much flesh on them old bones, eh?"

"You've said it. Going to eat him all the same. Christmas dinner."

The visitor roared with laughter. "I decline in advance," he said, "case you was going to invite me. Who ever heard of eating peacock?"

"They say it's better'n turkey."

"Give me turkey."

"Come tomorrow you'll get plenty. First thing in the morning we kills the whole blamed lot."

"Doing well, ain't you, Bert? In the money these days. But a sight too much work and worry for me. You got a gun?"

"What'd I use a gun for? We wring their necks."

"Never heard o' the rustlers?"

"Rustlers?"

"City crooks that come out in trucks and steals poultry and pigs and that."

Bert laughed. "I don't reckon as anybody'd come all this way out. 'Sides, we're well fenced, and the houses is all locked at night."

The visitor regarded him pityingly. "You got a lot to learn, pal," he said. "Well, that the lot for now? So long. Be seeing you. Four o'clock tomorrow. Here y'are. Your receipt."

He drove away, without offering Hennery anything at all. Bert looked at the paper and went whistling towards the cottage, where Millie appeared at the door.

"What was that he said about guns?" she demanded suspiciously. "I heard you talking."

"Some bunk about rustlers coming and pinching poultry and that."

Bert started going indoors. "Just the same I *will* get the old gun out," he added. "Just in case."

Hennery heard the door shut, cutting off their voices.

He was cold and weary, and very hungry. He climbed to

his perch and tried to settle down; but it was difficult. He put his head under his wing and closed his eyes resolutely; he drifted off to sleep.

Hennery awoke. He withdrew his head from under his wing and anxiety burned into his brain.

He sat there listening.

The night was pitch-black. The warmth of the hay gave him the illusion of comfort, and his brain was muzzy, he was not properly awake, he could not remember where he was.

A faint sound, in the distance. The crack of a broken twig, loud in the night silence. A single footstep, not repeated.

Furtive noises. Different noises. Not the noises he was used to, the rustlings and sniffings and cracklings that his mind accepted without question. A sharp ping. A soft whisper.

Hennery's brain was dim. He had confused recollections of danger—danger to himself, danger to the flock. He quivered. Terror gripped him, terror mounted. Terror brought him to his feet, stretched his neck, opened his beak.

The curved iron roof of the great Dutch barn acted as a mighty amplifier, multiplying the sound, sending it forth into the night with fantastic strength.

The great wailing cry, which for so long had not once escaped Hennery's beak, belled forth with all the power of a terror nameless, instinctive and obliterating, transcending all else.

"He-e-e-elp! *He-e-e-e-elp!* HE-E-E-E-ELP!"

As the echoes reverberated a voice broke out, sharply—a voice loud with sudden fright.

"My God! What was that?"

There was a stampede of footsteps. Then another voice, low and urgent. "Shut your jaw, you fool! How the hell do I know what it was? You'll—shut up!"

There was a crash as an upstairs window of the cottage was thrown open.

Footsteps, stealthy, creeping away. A sudden agitated pinging of the wire netting. The clang of a gate. More footsteps.

Hennery, terror succeeded by a terror-inspired fury, gave tongue again; and as the great strident call wailed out in the night there was a sudden blast of sound so deafening, so tremendous that it lifted Hennery clean off his perch so that his head hit the roof and he very nearly missed his footing as he came down.

"Thieves!" Bert's voice yelled then. "I damn near winged one!"

Bang again! Hennery, shattered, rocked on his perch, stricken dumb now. Rocked there more dead than alive, while footsteps

pounded, while Bert's feet clattered downstairs and the back door burst open and Bert rushed out.

A whirring and a whining in the distance, the sharp slam of a door, the roar of an engine—all sound that held abject terror for Hennery. He crouched on his perch and shivered in an ecstasy of fright.

Bert's footsteps, pounding down the farm road. Again that appalling *bang* but farther away, not so shattering. Then Bert pounding back.

"Millie! You take the gun. It's loaded. Both barrels. They broke open the main gate. Busted open one of the turkey houses. I reckon I winged one, and I got a look at the truck. They had to switch on the lights, see? I tried to bust a tyre. Too far. See, I'm off to phone the cops. You all right?"

"Course I am."

"Not scared?"

"Course I'm not scared. I can use the old gun, too. Go on, Bert. The cops may catch 'em."

Bert went.

Hennery crouched lower still. His terror gradually faded, with the fading of sounds. He was exhausted now. The night had been too full of excitement for an old bird. He let himself sink right down. He put his head under his wing again. He went to sleep.

It was to have been his last sleep.

The policeman straddled his bicycle and grinned brightly as Bert came out. "Well, Bert."

"Well, Tom."

"Had a bit of fun here last night, I did hear."

"Uh. Sorry I woke you so sudden."

"I wasn't asleep. Special instructions. Keep an eye skinned for suspicious-looking vehicles around Christmas. Been a lot o' this here rustling. That's why I was so quick off my mark."

"Quick enough, Tom?"

"Quick enough, Bert. That's what I'm here for. I phoned your message through, see, and you maybe won't believe it but they think they got 'em. Big truck, closed, four men with wire-cutters and all, and a pile o' sacks and three birds. One of 'em had got peppered a bit—"

"One of the sacks or one of the birds?"

"One of the men. That's how they got nabbed. Stopped on the road, chose a quiet spot to try and stop him bleeding, and a patrol car found 'em. Good work, Bert. Reckon you saved yourself a heap o' money, waking up like that."

"Reckon Hennery did."

"Hennery? Who's he? I sort of thought you just woke up—"

"Not me! I was sleeping like a log. And then I heard it."

"Heard what?"

"The most gawdawful row you ever heard, Tom. Yell! Talk about yell. It was like a thousand souls in torment all letting rip together. And it said, plain as plain: 'Help! Help! Help!'"

Tom scratched his head. "But what—"

"Hennery," Bert said.

"Who *is* Hennery?"

"There's Hennery."

Hennery, waking up late, waking up reluctantly, hating having to wake up because it was cold and he was hungry and there would be nothing to eat, heard the sound of voices and came along the girder and looked down. A man. That might mean nothing; but Hennery was not one to lose an opportunity. He sprang off the girder and floated down and walked, quite humbly, towards the visitor. Visitors were sometimes good for a bite or two.

"Cor!" said this visitor. "A peacock!"

"Yes. A peacock."

"Well, I'm busted."

"Well, so was I. Never knew he had a voice. And then that row! Anyway—Hey, Millie! Here's Hennery. Wants his breakfast. Send Sue out wi' a bowl of grain, will you?"

"Gets his breakfast, do 'e and all?" said Tom admiringly.

Bert grunted. "*And* his dinner—and supper if he wants it. From today on, so long as he's alive. You just add it up for yourself, Tom. How many birds could them guys have packed into that truck? And how much does that come to? And how many sacks o' grain would that buy? Now on, Hennery gets as much as he wants. Hennery gets going where he likes. Hennery stops here till he dies of old age. Hear that, Hennery?"

Sue arrived. She glowed at Hennery. "Oh, Hennery," she cried. "Dad's rare pleased with you. You saved us from the bad men!" And she held out the bowl of grain.

Hennery eyed it with complete astonishment. He did not believe it. He must still be dreaming. But he stretched his neck, he lowered his beak, and the grain was real, the grain slid down into his crop in a steady stream while Sue held the bowl.

The two men stood and watched, in admiration.

"That's right, Hennery," Bert said. "You eat up. You need a bit of stoking up after a night like that."

" Well, I'm busted," said Tom. " Fancy that now ! "

Millie came out.

She was red-eyed with interrupted sleep and she looked angry and disgruntled and pleased and proud all at the same time. She looked at Hennery.

" You never heard such a row," she said. " Good old Hennery. Bert and me was just saying when you come along, Tom, as how Hennery can have what he wants for the rest of his life, if he likes to stop on here. He's earned it."

Hennery stepped back. He really had had enough. He felt light-headed and faint. He felt vaguely conscious of admiration, of a new friendly aura about him. He realized that the one thing missing in this new haven had been added to it.

So with a calm and gentle dignity he strutted round, gazing at each in turn with wise old eyes, and then very slowly, very complacently, started off to explore the yard in search of just a little something for afters.

* * *

A CHARM AGAINST THE TOOTHACHE

Venerable Mother Toothache
Climb down from the white battlements,
Stop twisting in your yellow fingers
The fourfold rope of nerves ;
And tomorrow I will give you a tot of whisky
To hold in your cupped hands,
A garland of anise-flowers,
And three cloves like nails.

And tell the attendant gnomes
It is time to knock off now,
To shoulder their little pickaxes,
Their cold-chisels and drills.
And you may mount by a silver ladder
Into the sky, to grind
In the cracked polished mortar
Of the hollow moon.

By the lapse of warm waters,
And the poppies nodding like red coals,
The paths on the granite mountains,
And the plantation of my dreams.

JOHN HEATH-STUBBS

VISION OF LOVE

O me! what eyes hath Love put in my head,
Which have no correspondence with true sight?

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

On Saturday parents brought daughters down to see their brothers and, as this was a fashionable school and many of these girls if they were old enough had their photographs in the weekly papers, one knew them by sight before one was faced by what to me was beginning to be the glory of their flesh. It was time that I should begin to notice and, as I had had no contact, almost no conversation even with any but servants, and maids I did not seem to take for girls, I started at the extreme and put them on thrones, more particularly because I had been reading Keats. Nobody who has sisters can tell how remote they are to those who have none and, their appearance now being exactly what I admired, I went down the street finding angels dressed like crown princesses in every little judy visiting her brother.

HENRY GREEN, *Pack My Bag*

Dearest Kitten!

In the blythe days of honeymoon
With Kate's allurements smitten,
I lov'd her late, I lov'd her soon,
And call'd her Dearest Kitten;
But now my kitten's grown a cat,
And cross like other wives;
Oh! By my soul, my honest Mat,
I fear she has nine lives.

JAMES BOSWELL, 1740–95

Spellbound

Soon, half the population of Gadra was able to enjoy the spectacle of fifteen or twenty full-grown men fondling, caressing, kissing and whispering to a buffalo. Foremost and most ardent of us were the headman and Bikhram.

"Exquisite mountain of desire!" sighed the headman, pressing his temples to the hairy cheeks of the cow.

"Malika! Malika!" breathed Bikhram over and over again.

In case you don't know, that means "Queen! Queen!"

Evidently he could think of nothing else to say. He was young, you see, and less experienced than the headman.

The rest of us jostled for places closer to her ear, and many and varied were the protestations we made.

" Moon-calf ! " whispered one.

" My fortune ! Take it ! " cried another, and old Nattu Lal, whom experience had taught to be more specific, made his offer in a croaking voice.

" Eleven rupees ! " he said, and there were tears in his eyes.

CHAPMAN MORTIMER, *Father Goose*

Either Way

How did the party go at Portland Square?
I cannot tell you ; Juliet was not there.
And how did Lady Caster's party go?
Juliet was next to me and I do not know.

HILAIRE BELLOC, *Juliet*

Grudging Tribute

Such had ever been the Duke's magic in the household that Clarence had at first forgotten to mention that anyone else was dead. Of this omission he was glad. It promised him a new lease of importance. Meanwhile, he described in greater detail the Duke's plunge . . .

The sound of rain had long ceased. There was the noise of a gathering wind.

" Then in went a lot of others," Clarence was saying. " And they all shouted out ' Zuleika ! ' just like he did. Then a lot more went in. First I thought it was some sort of fun. Not it ! " And he told how, by inquiries further down the river, he had learned the extent of the disaster. " Hundreds and hundreds of them—*all* of them," he summed up. " And all for the love of *her*," he added, as a sulky salute to Romance.

SIR MAX BEERBOHM, *Zuleika Dobson*

Hooked

The unrype fruyts of wanton youthes desyre
so diffrent are to use from that they seeme
As when wee doe unto theyr height aspire
then moste wee loathe that wee moste deare did deame
To fynde our selves so blynded in conceyte
in steede of foode to fawne on flattringe Baite.

SIR ARTHUR GORGES, *The Vannetyes and Toyes*

Before the World was Made

If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.

What if I look upon a man
As though on my beloved,
And my blood be cold the while
And my heart unmoved?
Why should he think me cruel
Or that he is betrayed?
I'd have him love the thing that was
Before the world was made.

W. B. YEATS

Missionary Zeal

All that had passed, and was passing, between Mr. Arabin and the lady, it is unnecessary to give in detail.

It was her mission to make fools of men, and she was pursuing her mission with Mr. Arabin. She had almost got him to own his love for Mrs. Bold, and had subsequently almost induced him to acknowledge a passion for herself. He, poor man, was hardly aware what he was doing or saying. So little had he known of female attractions of that peculiar class which the signora owned, that he became affected with a kind of temporary delirium. She had whispered to him words that really meant nothing, but which, coming from such beautiful lips, seemed to have a mysterious significance which he felt though he could not understand.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE, *Barchester Towers*

Warning Note

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

S. T. COLERIDGE, *Kubla Khan*

THREE BEARS COTTAGE

Henry sat thinking of a delicious Goldilocks not a day more than twenty

by JOHN COLLIER

"OUR hen has laid two eggs," said Mrs. Scrivener, "and I have boiled them for breakfast."

As she spoke she unfolded a snowy napkin, and displayed the barnyard treasures, and she placed the white one in her husband's egg-cup, and the brown one in her own.

The Scriveners lived in a house with a steep roof and a white gable, set in a woodland tract, among juvenile birch trees. It was extremely small, but so was the rent, and they called it Three Bears Cottage. Their ménage was frugal, for Henry had retired at forty, in order to study Nature.

Nevertheless, everything was as neat as a pin, and everything was carefully regarded. Each week, in their tiny garden, a new lettuce approached perfection. Its progress was minutely inspected from day to day, and, at that hour when it reached the crest and pinnacle of its development, they cut it, and ate it.

Another day, they had the cauliflower.

People who live thus, from one cherished detail to the next, invariably have complexions clear to the point of transparency, and bright and bird-like eyes. They are also keenly sensitive to the difference between one new-laid egg and another, which, like many other fine points, is often overlooked by the hurrying multitudes in cities.

The Scriveners were both well aware that, contrary to a commercially fostered superstition, it is the brown egg that is superior in nourishment, in appearance, and in flavour. Mr. Scrivener noted that his wife had retained the brown egg for herself, and his eyes grew rounder and more bird-like than before.

"Ella," said he, "I notice that you have given me the white egg, and retained the brown one for yourself."

"Well," said she, "why not? Why should I not have the brown egg? It is I who keep everything neat and trim in the house, and polish the canary's cage, which you, if you were a man, would do for me. You do nothing but scratch about in the garden, and lounge about the woods, studying Nature."

" Do not call Dickie ' the canary ' in that fashion," responded her husband. " I sometimes think you have no affection for any living creature about you, least of all for myself. After all, it is I who feed our dear hen every day, and, when she lays a brown egg, I think I should at least be *asked* if I would like it."

" I think I know what the answer would be ! " said his wife with a short laugh. " No, Henry. I have not forgotten your conduct when the tomato ripened. I think the less said about who has what in this house, the better."

Henry was unable to think of a fitting reply. He gazed moodily at the white egg, which seemed more than ever contemptible to him. His wife sawed off the top of her own egg with a grating and offensive sound.

Henry took another look at his : "Heavens," thought he, " it is not only white ! It is smaller ! "

This was altogether too much. " Ella," said Henry, " you probably are uninterested, for you despise the marvels of Nature, but I once saw a picture of a boiled egg, with an undigested worm coiled up inside it. I believe the egg was a brown one."

" There is no worm in this egg," replied Ella, munching away imperturbably. " Look in your own. Very likely you will find one there."

Henry, like an unskilful operator of a boomerang, was forcibly struck by the idea he had launched at Ella, in the hope of making her abandon her egg to him. He looked closely at his own egg, essayed a spoonful, and found he had no taste for it.

" Hell and damn it ! " he muttered, for like many a mild man, he was subject to fits of fury, in which he was by no means guarded as to his language.

His wife looked at him quietly, so that he was ashamed, without being mollified. " Selfishness and greed," said he, " have made the world what it is today."

Ella, with unconcealed relish, devoured a heaped spoonful. With tight lips and burning eyes, Henry rose from the table, reached for his cap, and stamped out of the house.

Ella, with a lift of her eyebrows, took over his neglected egg, which she found not noticeably inferior in flavour to the first. This put her in an excellent humour, and it was with a whimsical rather than a gloating smile that she set about her household tasks.

Henry, on the other hand, slashed savagely at the tall weeds and grasses as he strode along the path to the woods.

" What a fool I was," muttered he to himself, " to retire so early, believing that happiness is to be found in a cottage ! I conceived a simplicity as pleasurable as a tale for children. Two

cups, one adorned with roses, and the other with cornflowers. Two plates, one with a blue ring, and the other with a red ring. Two apples on the tree, both rosy, but one slightly larger than the other. *And that should be for me!* I am a man, and it is right that I should have the larger one.

"Yes, it could be a divine life, if Ella had only a sense of the fitness of things. How happy I might be, if only she were less greedy, better-tempered, not addicted to raking up old grudges, more affectionate, with slightly yellower hair, slimmer, and about twenty years younger! But what is the good of expecting such a woman to reform?"

He had just reached this point in his meditation when his eye fell upon a singularly handsome mushroom, of the genus *clavaria*, and he uttered an exclamation of delight.

It was part of their frugal economy at Three Bears Cottage to enliven their menus with all kinds of gleanings from the woods and fields, with wild berries and hedge salads, and above all with various sorts of edible fungi, which they found singularly palatable and nutritious.

Henry therefore gathered this one, and wrapped it in his handkerchief. His natural impulse was, to make tracks for the cottage, and burst in radiant upon his mate (or perhaps enter lugubriously, holding his treasure trove behind his back for a surprise), but, in any case, sooner or later to bring it out exultingly, with, "Here it is, my love, an admirable specimen of the genus *clavaria*! Rake together your fire, my dear, and serve it up piping hot for lunch. You will nibble a little, and I shall nibble a little, and thus we shall have half each."

This generous urge was dashed by the thought that Ella was neither as good-tempered, nor as yellow-haired, nor as slim, nor as young as she ought to be. "Besides," thought he, "she will certainly contrive to keep the better half for herself, and in any case, it is a mistake to cut a mushroom, for it allows the nutritious juices to escape."

He looked about on all sides in the hope of finding another, but this was the only one.

"How eagerly I would take it home," thought he, "if I might be greeted by such a creature as I have often imagined! I would willingly sacrifice the juices. As it is, I had better toast it on a stick. It is a pity, for they tend to dry up that way."

He began to hunt about for some twigs with which to make a little fire, and almost at once his eye fell upon another fungus, of singularly interesting shape, and of a pearly pallor that spoke volumes to the student of Nature. He recognized it at once as

the Death Angel, that liberal scientists call *Amanita Phalloides*—if the ladies will pardon the Latin.

It combines the liveliest of forms with the deadliest of material, and the smallest morsel will fell a man like a thunderbolt. Henry gazed respectfully at this formidable fungus, and was unable to repress a shudder.

"Nevertheless," said he, "it is certainly very appropriately named. It is around such a toadstool that one might expect to see a fairy tripping, a delicious little creature with golden hair . . ."

"And, by all that's wonderful," cried he, "figuratively speaking, I believe that is just what I *do* see!"

With trembling hands he garnered the lethal titbit, and wrapped it in his handkerchief beside the other, carefully interposing a fold of the linen to avoid any contact between them.

"Ella has always made nasty cracks at Nature," said he. "Now Nature shall have a crack at her."

He at once hurried back to the cottage, where Ella greeted him with a smile. "It is easy to smile when you have had two eggs for breakfast," thought our hero. "Let us see how you'll manage after having *Amanita Phalloides* for lunch."

This reflection struck him as being highly diverting, and he accorded his wife a very creditable smirk in return, from which she concluded their little tiff was all forgotten. This she found especially gratifying, for she was a simple, primitive creature, and her double breakfast ration had caused the blood to flow warm and sluggish in her veins.

"See what I have found," said Henry. "Two mushrooms, and of different varieties. This one is a *clavaria*, a wholesome fungus, with a decent, satisfying flavour."

"And what," said she, "is this other, which looks so white and pearly?"

"Oh, that," said he deceitfully, "that is *Eheu fugaces*."

"What a pretty name!" said she. "But what a very odd shape! I mean, of course, for a mushroom."

"Pay no attention to that," said he. "It is more nutritious than you can possibly imagine: it is rich in vitamins D, E, A, T, and H. What's more, it has a flavour fit for a king, so I shall eat it myself, for you can hardly be called kingly, not being built that way."

"Ah, that is true," said she, with a giggle. "That is perfectly true, darling. Ha, ha! I am not built that way."

This reply set Henry back a hundred leagues, for he had expected her to assert a strong claim to the deadly mushroom,

as soon as she heard him credit it with a superior vitamin content and flavour.

However, he was quickwitted, and at once changed his tack. "Nevertheless," said he, "you shall have this excellent mushroom, for I think you thoroughly deserve it."

"Why, Henry," she said, "that is very sweet of you! How can I reward you for your kindness? What can a mere woman do to show how she appreciates a good husband?"

"Mince them up," said he, "and cook them separately, so as not to confuse the flavours. Serve them each on a piece of toast, and cover them liberally with grated cheese."

"I shall do that," she said, "though it goes to my heart to chop it." She gave him a nudge and went into the kitchen, and began to dress and prepare the mushrooms.

Henry waited in the sitting-room, thinking of a delicious creature, not a day more than twenty years old. Ella, peeking lovingly round the door, recognized the glimmer in his bird-like eye, and continued her cookery with a song in her heart.

"He deserves nothing but the best," thought she, "and he shall have it. He shall have the better mushroom, for he is a king among men, and he said it is highly nutritious. After all, I had two eggs for breakfast, and those, tra-la-la, were sufficient for me."

"Come, my dear," said she, when all was done. "Here is our lunch ready, and here are our two plates, mine with a blue ring and yours with a red one. Eat heartily, my angel, and soon you shall be rewarded for your kindness and consideration."

Henry, who was peckish by reason of his diminished breakfast, wished moreover to fortify his tissues against the day when the true Goldilocks should arrive at Three Bears Cottage. He therefore sawed himself off a sizeable morsel and crammed it into his maw.

He at once shot out of his chair, and began to leap, writhe, stagger, spin, curvet, gyrate, loop, and flounder all over the room. Simultaneously he was seized with giddiness, nausea, spots before the eyes, palpitations, convulsions, and other symptoms too hideous to mention.

"What on earth is the matter, darling?" said his wife. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"The devil!" he gasped. "I have eaten the Death Angel! I have eaten *Amanita Phalloides*!"

"Really, my dear!" said she in amazement. "What an expression! What ever can you be thinking of?"

"You b——!" cried he. "Will you stand there bandying

words? I am dying! I am poisoned! Run for a doctor. Do you hear?"

"Poisoned?" said she. "By that mushroom? Why, Henry, that is the one you tried to palm off on me!"

"I confess it," said he. "I was feeling aggrieved and resentful. Forgive me. And, for heaven's sake, fetch me a doctor, or in five minutes I shall be no more."

"I forgive you for trying to poison me," said Ella. "But I cannot forget that awful name you called me just now. No, Henry, a lady-dog cannot run for a doctor.

"I shall go no further than to that powerfully-built young wood-cutter who is chopping away at an elm tree down in the hollow. He has often whistled when I passed him, like an oriole in full song. I shall ask him what *he* thinks of a man who calls his wife such a name, and what he thinks of a man who brings home a thing like that to his wife. And I have no doubt at all he will tell me."

★ ★ ★

PARTY MANNERS

When I was four years old I went to a children's Christmas party at Windsor Castle. My behaviour on that occasion was reported in the local press, and several different versions have been in intermittent circulation ever since. The true version, to the best of my belief, is as follows. When we were all seated at long tables, enjoying a very good meal the door opened and Queen Victoria entered accompanied by a Lady-in-Waiting. We were all called to attention and told to stand up and stop eating. The Queen passed slowly along each table, saying a few words to each child. I had just greedily grabbed a lot of grapes and piled them on my plate. When the Queen reached me, she said: "What a lot of grapes you've got." And I replied, shrilly but audibly, "Yes, Queen." Then she said: "I expect you'd like me to go away, so that you can eat all those grapes." And I replied again, "Yes, Queen." Whereat she turned to her Lady-in-Waiting and said: "What a loud voice that child has, just like his father!" For he, of course, had often preached to her, and no one could ever fall asleep during one of his sermons. This I believe to be the true version. Others, less agreeable on both sides, have been put about, some, I suspect, by my political opponents in my maturity. But I must here testify that I did *not* say: "Go away, Queen, I'm eating cake," nor did she say: 'What a horrid little boy!"

HUGH DALTON, *Call Back Yesterday*

★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

SHEAMUS AND THE IMMUNY

**A small panel slid open—
and a tentative nose appeared**

by MARTIN JORDAN

SHEAMUS was busy ferreting rabbits when the Immuny came out of the sky and paralysed him with its ray.

He felt his body become a sack of bones with no control over his muscles.

"And me the King of Mayo itself!" he murmured.

This was true, but Sheamus had no subjects; he was the only native human in that county, and knew it. He was a fine figure of a man, with his pelt loin-cloth and white torso and dark eyes; and by his side a sleekly dead rabbit told of the ferret's skill, if not his own.

He lay on his back and gazed at the descending Immuny, which hovered a few feet above him on its antigravs. It was a glassoid capsule, large enough to hold a man. You could not see who lay within, but only a greyness that gave an illusion of boiling smoke when sun and shadow painted it. The surface was pimpled with nozzles, barrels, and antennae as thick as the horns of an old-world sea-mine.

Sheamus had seen several immunies before, but never so close as this. From afar they looked like giant beans, and had often sent him from his rabbiting or turf-cutting to cower safe in the depths of the shore rocks. This day, in the power of his youth and freedom, the thing had pounced from cover of the sunward sky and now held him fast.

He was ignorant neither of the nature of immunies nor of the existence of the Martian settlement, like a half-bubble in that portion of holy Ireland once occupied by the city of Dublin. Years before, in his grandfather's day, the last atomic war had ended inconclusively, leaving but few men and women alive over the whole planet. Afterwards, in his father's time, had come the Martians, planting their domed cities sparsely in Europe and North America—the inheritors.

Actually, the Martians were descendants of terrestrials who had colonized a denuded and dead Mars at the end of the twenty-first century. Through generations they had acclimatized themselves to the deficient Martian atmosphere; now, on returning to Earth, they had to live in pressure-tight bubbles of low density, lest the oxygen-richness of their mother planet made them drunk or mad.

Their science of immunology was well developed; no terrestrial bacteria reached them; rain and fine were alike to their sealed cities, and they breathed their thin mixture without thought of the shifting columns of sea-scented air that moved against the transparencies of their city-roofs.

" God save you kindly," Sheamus said to the capsule, " and will you please be giving back a man his own limbs ? "

The Immuny clucked. A pair of electronic eyes on stalks hovered disdainfully; then Sheamus felt himself sucked from the ground on a compulsion-beam, turned over in mid-air and dumped unceremoniously on his stomach, whilst the eyes scanned his rear portions. Soon, the Immuny's curiosity satisfied, he felt his body rising to an orthogonal position, and, while the paralysis gradually left his members, he found himself standing up.

At once he began to sprint towards the sea caves, but a sudden pain at the base of the spinal column halted him. The Immuny came sailing up, a rampant pellet, and a voice, slightly amplified, came from it: " Follow."

Keeping about three feet from the ground, the Immuny moved in the direction of the Sheefry Hills, and Sheamus followed willy-nilly, as if invisible elastic tethered him to it, the compulsion-beam drawing slight bulges from his flesh, like tidal humps on the sea. Now and again he was forced to take great leaps, but the beam seemed to cushion his inertia with agencies unseen and pneumatic. Nevertheless, he was soon out of breath, for he had disdained to save it by stopping his talk.

" A King, is it ? " he grumbled. " And me scraping and moiling from each dawn of day, with never a sight of a limber girl to walk the world with; shying stones with the loneliness against the moon of night and saying curses ! Will you quit stretching out the earth between us like a watch-spring ? "

The Immuny jerked him bouncingly over a dune; he scrabbled with his toes in an effort to win purchase, and went on: " Where is it you're taking me in holy Ireland ? "

" City One-Ecks," the Immuny answered obligingly.

" Sure, that's Dublin by its outland name, and there's a slice

enough of the world between would destroy a man, and he without a coat against the cold of night."

"You talk much and say little," crackled the Immuny.

Sheamus carried a bag in one hand and the rabbit by the ears in the other. He swung the bag, in which the ferret lay quiet, and tried to match his steps to the rhythmic suction of the beam.

"And what will they be after with a complete man in the great city of Dublin that was?"

"Hitherto our study-units have been unable to capture a live male native. You'll be examined morphologically, psi-tested and electroencephalographed."

"You've a fine bit of talk," Sheamus said, "and it's with yourself I'd go for the company, were you a man of parts and not a floating Immuny altogether."

"As to that," the Immuny announced, "I'm a human being of female sex and, incidentally, a psycho-anthropologist, primary class."

"A woman, you're telling me? And of an age, might I ask, fit to scald the heart out of a man?"

"I am thirty-five," said the Immuny.

"Itself no age at all—and you a grand, hardy girl would knock the heads together of any two men left in the world! But will you not be coming out of that air-box to the light of day?"

"I will not. The atmosphere of your planet is toxic."

"It's a hard thing to be so boxed, and you'll be staying there, I'm thinking, when no-teeth are in your mouth and the bright hair of you shed like nibbled furze in a sheep-fold."

"Not at all," the Immuny said with complacency. "I don't, of course, stay in this thing once I pass from the airlock into the city."

"It's rising I see you from it," Sheamus ecstatically said, spreading his two hands the better to catch the vision and stumbling over a ground-root, "like a blessed angel from her golden cloud, the wet, red lips of you puckered to kiss the sun and the blossoms in your shining gown stealing the light of him as you pace abroad!"

"Really . . ." the Immuny's metallic voice said, "it's fortunate that I graduated early in semantics, or I'd find your meaning too alien for communication. As it is, I recognize your diction as poetic, which is an archaic fashion of letting the sound and symbol swallow the sense. There's also an epidemic quality in this; since listening to you, I am surely less disciplined in speech myself."

All this time, behind the levitated capsule, the invisibly hauled Sheamus had breasted the foothills, the sea to his broad back.

He now wiped the sweat from his eyes with an unbloodied

bit of the rabbit and appealed to the Immuny: "Is it all the way to Dublin you'd walk me, and you not caring if a man fasted or was fed? Now here's a rabbit as fine as ever chewed grass, and I'm thinking it's my dead body you'll be dragging beyond unless we have him on a bit fire this minute."

"For strength-maintenance," said the Immuny, "you may consume the rabbit. But be quick."

Forthwith it halted, the compulsion-field dwindled by half, and Sheamus was enabled to skin and draw the rabbit and gather green sticks from the furze. Soon a fire was burning, the rabbit dangling from the apex of a tripod above the fiery centre.

"Is it a taste you'll be having yourself," asked Sheamus, "or do the likes of you dine on desolation, with naught but the heady spices of the daylight air?"

"Actually," the Immuny answered, "I am in-taking at this instant a series of protein-pills, designed to provide carbo-hydrate and anti-scorbutic coverage for eighteen hours on a calculated spendage of a hundred ergs per——"

"God save us, will you stop?" breathed Sheamus. "For himself's a prime eating rabbit, surely, and the smell of him enough to woo the water from the mouth of a dead soul." The rabbit was, in fact, starting to crackle in an appetizing fashion, and Sheamus went on: "Will you not be poking the lovely head of you out of that contraption to sniff the scent he makes in the world?"

"Twenty-one per cent oxygen—especially enriched, as it is, by the gross smell of roasting flesh," said the Immuny, "is too much for me."

"Oh, my grief," said Sheamus, who was dreaming cunningly of a plan, "it's yourself I thought to show by one only sniff the soreness of fasting on pills. Will you not breathe it now?"

"Immunology notwithstanding," mused the Immuny, "the occasional direct experience *is* useful to an anthropologist."

Thereupon a small panel of about six inches square slid open on the Immuny's surface and a tentative nose appeared. With the quickness of thought Sheamus dropped his hand into the ferret's bag, snatched out the wriggling beast and stuffed it through the little hole into the interior of the Immuny.

There came a sound on the voice-mechanism like machines suddenly seized with diamond-dust; the Immuny sprang twenty feet into the air, spun concentrically, and dropped with spiral cavortings to ground-level, where sundry hatches burst open and the occupant shot outwards, screaming, into Sheamus's waiting arms.

"Shut your yelling," Sheamus said, as he lowered the strug-

gling body and pinioned it by the wrists to the black earth, covering it with his own to prevent it arching like a bow. " It's a fine girl you are for all, ferret or no ferret." And he implanted a strong and avid kiss against the anthropologist's parted lips.

She was a pale, light-haired woman of small stature, dressed in the conventional, brief Martian smock of knee-length plaston. Her indignation was complete; her eyes flashed; her heels drummed; her body heaved.

Sheamus kissed her again long and lingeringly, in spite of the turning head and snapping teeth, and he murmured coaxingly: " Of what should I be thinking now but of yourself and me walking the shore below and living easy, for it's destroyed I am the times sweet winds do be passing, and the moon of night hanging in the waves, and myself sitting lonesome in my wattle cabin beyond ?"

" You're asking me to live with *you*—a native Irish ? "

" It's little you'll mind of Irish or Martian itself when you feel my arms around you, and I feeding kisses to your two lips like a blessed——"

" That's enough ! " said the anthropologist, who had ceased to struggle. She lay quiet for a moment, and added thoughtfully: " Kiss me again."

Sheamus replied with a volubility of action more picturesque than words. Against his lips she whispered, more to herself than to him: " It's becoming clear. Love is a question of oxygen."

" Is it, now ? "

" I'm quite drunk; I have a burning chest and hot eyes. There's nothing like this in the air of the city."

" There's not, is it ? "

" So much not," she frowned, " that they're experimenting with test-tube babies ! "

" Well now, a bitter thing that is, would tear the heart from a decent soul ! "

" Give me a little of the rabbit. But kiss me once more first."

They sat side by side and ate, until suddenly she started up, pointing to a rapid dot in the sky that was coming close.

" A patrol robot ! I'd forgotten . . . When you threw that animal into the immunity suit I sent out Signal Six. That brings a robot—and here it comes ! "

The robot came waltzing from the east. It had killer's hands of flesh-imitating plastic, an executioner's blaster stuck in its belt, and an eye-turret all round its head. Magnetic cut-off

and antigrav mechanisms enabled it to ride the air like an angel in an Italian primitive; vague, hearth-learnt memories stirred in Sheamus, so that he half expected a trumpet. But all that happened was the descent of the robot between them with a dull clang.

"Saints of glory!" moaned Sheamus, beginning to scramble from the place.

"Sit still," she said. "These Number Sixes wouldn't hurt a fly, unless . . ."

"What, unless?"

"Unless you provoke them. It's got one—and only one—response-circuit. It won't attack *you* unless you attack *me*."

"Then it's small damage likely at all, seeing that I love the soul of you like water on a green hill."

"And I," said the woman thoughtfully, "feel the greatest possible promise in my behaviour-potential when *you* are near."

"Well, then . . ." Sheamus sighed, turning his yearning arms towards her; but immediately the robot vibrated with a whirr of menace, and the anthropologist shouted at Sheamus: "Stop! Don't touch me!"

The three sank into immobility.

"Is it to touch you I am not at all?" whispered Sheamus.

"It's all very difficult. You see, the robot hasn't anything built-in to distinguish between aggressiveness and—er, er—affection."

Sheamus stared at the robot hard. The single band it had for eyes returned his gaze with a stern twinkle, and a faint hiss came from it like a touchy, metallic swan.

"Is it understanding our speech, you're thinking?"

"Not a word."

"And can you not be shooing it away, and you the lady and mistress of it, surely?"

"I've no control—it just has that one built-in function."

"Then oh, my grief, for us might be facing each other till the end of time, and our passions simmering the like of spring cattle as have the Carrowmore Lough between!"

As the day passed it was apparent that Sheamus's simile exactly described their plight, and by late afternoon they had reached the limit of word and glance as instruments of love and had fallen into a silence less rich than the sad lapping of the sea—for they had retraced their steps to the shore and now sat near the clay-and-wattle cabin that Sheamus had, nearly hidden among the headland rocks.

The robot, which seemingly required neither food nor rest

and enjoyed the semi-immortality of a self-lubricating machine, could be defined neither as person nor companion, but as raw presence. All day it stood within inches of the woman. It whirred or hissed softly when Sheamus so much as blew his nose. Once in mid-afternoon it had carried out routine blaster-maintenance; for the rest, it was content to exist as a pattern of horribly effortless vigilance.

They had tried several times to run away; the robot swooped through the air and intercepted. Sheamus had suggested waiting until nightfall, which was moonless, and losing it on the hills, but the woman warned him that its eyes were efficient over the whole range of light intensity.

Now they were sitting, frustrated, and the woman pointed to a slim hulk near the sea's edge. " You've a boat ? "

" A stove boat I found myself by the dead ruins of Dooghbeg, all a hundred years old."

" You might mend it and fish."

" That I might, but my heart isn't in it, and poor salty eating it is, with rabbits lepping like grey water on the inland hills."

" All the same, mend the boat and we'll go fishing."

The sun was still high, and Sheamus took his gear and set to work with wooden wedges, his mallet, and a shaved and pliant board.

Afterwards, as he hauled the light keel over the sands, cloud-shadows crossed the wrinkled sea like pools within pools, and the great flow of water was calm to where the blue whale of Clare dozed on the lip of the horizon.

They ran out the boat, wading knee-high, floated her, and boarded.

As they drifted with the reaction away from the shore, their minds bemused by the always-hypnotic experience of putting to sea, the robot ceased for a moment to be noticeable; then the woman gave a cry and Sheamus rattled the rowlocks . . .

Apparently, the data that had been fed into the robot included nothing marine. It was a yard from their stern, waist-high, advancing with the boat, and it was making a continuous clicking noise; and this internal activity—like a computer with all banks overloaded by an insoluble problem—seemed to intensify as it advanced farther into the waves; and as Sheamus thrust in his oars and they shot towards deeper water, it began to vanish—the sea closed silently over its head and the clicking seemed to linger, very muffled and watery for an instant, and then was still.

They were alone.

" Ah, the sacred wonder it is ! " cried Sheamus. " And him following after us like an old ferret tracing a rabbit, and laying

vexation between my own self and the finest woman out of Ireland ! "

" Quiet," she said. " We haven't much time . . ."

And, indeed, when, much later, they put in to shore, the robot came lumbering out of the waves, a cybernetic Venus. It posted itself in its usual position, close to the woman, and the eye was flashing in its turret and the clicking had accelerated to a whirr.

" Running wild, you are ! " Sheamus mocked. " With us having the wit to duck you in the wide sea ! "

" *I'm afraid he's learning*," said the woman.

" Ah, a poor fellow it is ! But will you not be after taking another boat-trip to set the souls of us sizzling like a one only song of dawn ? "

" Nothing better; but I tell you he's *learning*. The sea took him by surprise; he thought he could walk on the water without his antigravs, and by the time he was submerged it was too late for him to use them. But he *has* his learning-banks; he won't make the same mistake twice."

She paused, and added thoughtfully: " That is, unless we confuse him. Can you swim under water ? "

" Like a sleek salmon I can."

" And I," she said, " can hold my breath for long periods, because of the low oxygen need of a Martian. Come—do as I do . . ."

And she cast off her plaston-smock and ran naked to the sea. " It's a strenuous day I'm having," Sheamus murmured, as he threw aside his pelt and gladly followed.

Pushing the boat, they waded in together. The robot went with them to the sea-edge. The sounds of internal conflict were subdued; it could almost be said that it had made up its circuits. As soon as its steel-plated feet reached the first feathered line of foam it rose on its antigravs with a sound like satisfaction.

The woman and Sheamus, on the other hand, continued into the sea until their heads vanished under the surface, and then began to swim

Minutes later, when they brought the empty boat to shore and waded out of the water, the robot was a vociferous gadfly—one that rushed hither and thither over the waves buzzing for lost algae.

When it alighted and took up its customary post near the woman its electronic inside was singing louder than ever. It was also perceptibly hot. The fact could be realized without touch —an ambient hotness was there by convection.

" I think something's fused," said she.

" He'll be rightly spavined yet; and he already but the remnant of a man."

" He's been shaken badly, but not yet by a really fatal dilemma. Quick ! In and out of the water and *bob* ! "

Again they pushed out the boat; and this time they stepped off the gunwale into deep water—scrambled aboard—dived off again—jumped up and down like corks . . . At one moment Sheamus's head would be seen, at another the woman's; for long periods nothing was visible except the gentle waves. When at last they regained the boat and rowed for the shore the robot was missing.

Minutes later it came, heavy and dripping from the sea.

" More ! " yelled the woman. Together they ran yet again to the water, splashing in.

But a sound, unlike any heard before, made them turn—in time to see a blue flash ! The robot pitched to the sand, alive to nothing save the law of gravitation.

" Dead ! " breathed Sheamus as he took her in his arms. " Dead he is for certain, and it's threescore years before us we have to walk the world and go bathing in the sea. And always I'll be seeing you, with your white skin and the green sea-waves about you, my love and comrade, surely."

" I must learn some . . . terrestrial endearments."

" My glory-love ! "

" Glory-love . . ." she repeated.

" Sun-of-dawn ! "

" Sun-of-dawn . . ."

And then—" Quick ! " she gasped, and pushed him away so that he fell back on the sand. A rapid dot in the sky was drawing close.

The robot came waltzing from the east on its magnetic cut-off and antigravs, and it looked like a strange and sinister angel from some Italian primitive.

It descended between them with a dull clang.

Silently, they watched it and heard its comfortable and cooing electronics. The woman covered her face with two white hands.

" I forgot. I forgot ! Some of these patrol robots have replacement-mechanisms. If something should happen to them, an automatic signal goes out before the end. And that brings *another* patrol robot."

" It's to the boat we'll be going this minute ? " Sheamus asked hopefully.

" No . . ." she said thoughtfully. " That way, there would

soon be a noticeable robot-lack at Central." Slowly she brightened. "Let's go back to the immunity suit. I shall go back to the city."

"But——"

"You can depend on me to visit you on Saturdays, and sometimes mid-weekly as well."

"My glory-love!"

"My sun-of-dawn," she said matter-of-factly.

* * *

FESTIVE BOARD

"Strange to see," as Samuel Pepys observed, "how a good dinner and feasting reconciles everybody"—even, for the most part, our oddly assorted collection of diners, whom we hope you will recognize through the haze of good will! Allow one point for remembering the occasion, one for the source, and one for the author in each case. The answers are on page 87.

1. *After the laudable Custom of his Ancestors, he killed eight Fat Hogs for the Christmas Feast!*

2. *"I love thee true," she said, and they feasted appropriately on honey and manna-dew . . .*

3. *And the pudding—a wonderful pudding indeed!—like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top!*

4. *Three beans in a pound of butter—this was the wedding supper that won the—alas, ill-fated—bride!*

5. *Ho-ti's cottage these days was burnt down oftener than ever, for loss of homestead, unfortunately, was the necessary prelude to the banquet!*

6. *A plain leg of mutton—and smoking, and tender, and juicy—I prithee get ready at three!*

7. *For a festive and lively occasion the rarest dish in all the land, bedecked with garlands, bays and rosemary . . .*

8. *She offered him the sweets of the forest, but his desire was a bottle of hay.*

9. *She brought forth butter in a lordly dish, but here there was no Good Will!*

FIRST TIME OUT

Water ran off his black oilskins and his fair hair blew in the wind

by T. O. BEACHCROFT

IT was going to be rough. As soon as the steamship *Millie* put her nose past the last rocks of Vigo bay and was out into the open sea, she lifted and dropped. She slapped into the waves with a sudden violence, and a skelter of spray climbed over her bows.

Rob was glad. He wanted it to be rough. He wanted to come back from his first voyage with as much experience as he could gather. He wanted to be much older than he was. He watched Stannet and Fulger, who had been working till the last minute, and even after the ship was under way, on lashing down some deck cargo.

"You'd better get below, Rob," shouted the bosun to him. "It's going to be rough."

They had been down the coast of Portugal to Lisbon. When they had put into Vigo unexpectedly on the return trip, Rob had thought it the most beautiful place he had ever seen. A blue inland sea, surrounded on every side by green and brown hills. He thought of the evening before when he had talked to a girl on the quayside. She had given him an address and he was going to write to her.

Now the sunshine was gone. They moved in a wilderness of grey and white waves. He shivered. He looked at Stannet who stood with one hand on a wire stay balancing himself easily to every roll of the ship. The water ran off his black oilskins, and his fine fair hair blew in the wind. He looked as if he were part of a film story.

Fulger came to get a tool, grasping handholds carefully.

"Get out of the road," he said to Rob. "What d'you want to muck about here for?"

Fulger was in a bad temper; but he was always grumbling. Rob recalled the arguments and scenes that had already been caused by this deck cargo. It seemed that Captain Broad had given orders at the very last moment to take it on board; there were heavy packing-cases and some parts of dismantled machinery, which bulged through their sacking covers in awkward shapes.

The men had made difficulties. The hatch-cover had been taken off and put on again. There had been a row with the Spanish dockers, who had gone off and left the crane-driver and the crew of the *Millie* to stow the load on deck as best they could. Then Captain Broad had refused to delay the start.

"Your bloody uncle's going to have this lot overboard," said Fulger, coming back. "Taking on a deck cargo in a sea like this."

Rob found he was already beginning to feel sick. He began to wonder if Fulger was right, if there was some real danger in the deck cargo. As if to confirm his fears, there came a sudden shout from Stannet and Fulger.

Stannet, not quite satisfied with part of the work, had cast off one of the containing ropes. At this very moment the ship struck a succession of big seas. One of the large awkwardly shaped castings rushed across the deck, narrowly missing Stannet, and ended up with a crash half over the side of the boat, hooked precariously on a metal cleat. As the ship rolled, the casting dipped in and out of the water.

Fulger stood and cursed. An order was shouted from the bridge. Stannet quickly replaced the rope he had loosened. In a moment he had carried another rope to the casting and attached it; then with a crowbar he levered the bulk of metal back onto the deck. Rob started forward to help.

"Get back, boy," shouted his uncle. "Stannet, get a rope round yourself. Chuck him a rope, Fulger."

But by now the whole incident was over as quickly as it had begun. Jack Simmons the bosun appeared on deck and took charge. The casting was hauled back and the whole cargo made safe again. The men began to go below, and Captain Broad came down the iron ladder from the bridge to have a look at the deck cargo for himself.

"Why the hell did you loosen that rope?" he said to Stannet.

"I was making the job safe," said Stannet. "That casting was going to shift. We had to get it all done too quickly."

"You could have got another turn of rope round it before taking off what was there. Use your sense, man!"

Stannet looked surly and went below. Captain Broad turned to go back to the bridge, but Rob spoke to him.

"What do you want?" said the captain. "I told you to go below."

"Stannet was very brave," said Rob. "I don't think you saw what he did."

"Of course I saw what he did."

The ship pitched and Rob was almost overcome with sea-sickness.

" I don't think you were fair to him," said Rob. " He risked his life."

For a moment Captain Broad looked as if he were going to tell Rob to go to hell. The boy had badgered him to be taken, and he'd have to make it clear to him he must rank as one of the crew.

" I know Stannet," he said. " Got a young wife. I'm not going to have men on my ship risking their lives instead of using common sense. Now get below: and obey orders."

" Yes, sir," mumbled Rob, and reeled away to the heads.

He was violently sick. He stumbled on weak legs to the foc'sle and lay on his plunging bunk. Soon he was sick again.

He lost all sense of time. Men came and went in the bunks round him.

Behind him came a faint *knock*, *knock*, almost as if someone were tapping; it was followed by a volley of cracks, then by creaks and groans all over the ship; by the thunder of water; the thumping of the engines. Where had all the crew gone to, he wondered; had anything happened ?

He lifted his arm from his aching forehead, looked round, and turned in his bunk. There was a green metal table clamped to the floor, an electric-light bulb in a wire cage over it, and bunks ranged round. The place was close and stinking. It smelt of hot engine oil, of frying fat, of the heads. There was a foul taste in his mouth.

He shut his eyes again and listened to the noises.

Knock, *knock*, *knock*—surely it was more regular and deliberate than the other creaks and thumps: but it was almost too faint to hear.

There had been a scarecrow of a man on the quayside at Vigo, who had begged, asked what port they were sailing to in England, whined and pleaded with Rob to help him find a ship for England, somehow; asked him who the captain was; begged for a peseta or two. Rob could see now the white stubble of beard against a brown emaciated face: the shapeless coat and filthy shirt; the skeleton underneath.

Now, perhaps, this poor devil of a man was imprisoned in the hold, knocking for release. What was it like to be a man of sixty or more, so destitute, so friendless ? Rob listened with straining ears, but now the knocking had stopped.

There was a booming smash, as a wave struck the *Millie*.

She rolled so far that he was lying on the ship's side, while his bunk rose grotesquely above him, and jerseys, sea-boots, and magazines showered upon him from other bunks. He heard a rumble in the hold as if packing-cases were on the move. A violent pitch followed and the propeller screamed and raced clear of the water. We've been engulfed, he thought: this is the end.

Then all went on as before, the endless swooping and rolling, the creaks of the ship, and the pounding of the waves. Then suddenly, *knock, knock;* faint, but in a human rhythm: unmistakably; then it stopped again.

Rob fell into a half-dream thinking of all that had happened to him recently: the hateful life in an office, the stupid night-school that had enslaved him against his will; the angry arguments with his father. At last he had persuaded his uncle to take him on one trip: his parents did not know yet that he had thrown his job up for good, that nothing could ever make him go near that sort of work again.

The fortnight of the voyage passed before his mind: the crew of ten or a dozen men coming aboard; some blankly indifferent, some friendly. From the first he had noticed Stannet. "That's what I want to be like," he thought.

Then he saw all the quays and cranes again as the *Millie* put out from Avonmouth; the run down the Bristol Channel; the last view of Land's End, the first view of Ushant, a low-lying shore with dark rocks, appearing in a dawn mist. Then on across the Bay of Biscay, with an unwrinkled surface, and a huge smooth swell, which gradually began to make him feel sick; then brilliant sunshine; a mountainous coastline falling into a reflecting sea; visits to Villa Garcia, to Leixões, where the sun was dazzling white upon the harbour wavelets; then turning up the Tagus to Lisbon.

Stannet had taken him on shore and shown him something of these places; Stannet who spoke a few words of Spanish, Portuguese, and French; of Arabic, too, if it was wanted; Stannet whose fair Devonian looks made him something to be stared at among so many smaller darker men. In the sunshine his hair turned silver.

Dick Stannet already seemed to be friendly with half the world; wheezy old women who ran dockside cafés, young sailors and dock-workers whose names were Bento or Miguel, women who raised baskets of fish on to their heads with shrill shouts of "Ai Carapau." Stannet took Rob about with him, and everywhere they went, it seemed men and girls were waving

and calling out to Stannet " Como vai, Ricardo ? " He felt he was growing up fast.

Each night after supper Stannet had shaken Rob off, told him to clear off back to the ship as he had to go and see friends who would keep him late. The other men had laughed and said, " Where's Stannet gone to ? Wouldn't he take you ? "

On the last night they had wandered in the dusk at Vigo among the narrow streets of the old town, where the houses are tarred as if they might put to sea like ships. Then Stannet had gone off alone. On the way back Rob himself had spoken to a girl. She had told him she was also eighteen, and had only just left school. She asked him if he was a shipmate of Richard Stannet's, and if they were coming back to Vigo soon.

When they had parted, they had kissed: a kiss that was utterly unlike the childish pecks that he had given one or two girls at home; a kiss that seemed to make this girl his own; his own to dream about, to write to when he reached home. He saw her now, her dark eyes and brows and the hair unexpectedly brown, almost fair, above them.

Suddenly he was wide awake again, back in the foc'sle. Fulger and another man had come in together. Then he was left alone with Fulger, who sat on his bunk, moaning and muttering to himself. One of his hands was swathed in bandages. Rob could pick an occasional " bleeding shame " and " why do they always want to pick on me ? " Then Fulger rocked about and went on whimpering and moaning.

Rob, still feeling waves of nausea when he moved, sat up also. " Is there anything I can do ? " he said.

The ship gave a lurch and threw Fulger against the side of his bunk. Now he began to cry outright, his face contorted, tears running down as if he were a child.

Rob was disgusted. Fulger must be a man of twenty-six or seven.

" Is it very bad ? " he said. " What happened ? "

" It was all that swine Smithers's fault," he said. " Done it on purpose, I believe." But Rob could not make out how it had happened.

" It's all in a mess," said Fulger. " All crushed. Captain bandaged it up. He says there's nothing broken. He don't know. What shall I do, if I lose my hand ? Oh, it's cruel."

Again he moaned and rocked on his bunk. The ship wallowed and slopped about in violent jerks.

" Fulger," said Rob, " can you hear that knocking ? "

" What knocking ? "

" There "

Fulger listened without interest. "Whole ship's falling to bits," he said. "Your uncle oughtn't to have taken that cargo on."

Fulger now went off on a long tirade against Captain Broad, saying the ship was undermanned, and he'd wreck the lot of them.

"Listen, Fulger. There's that knocking again. Do you think that beggar on the quayside could have got in?"

"Let me alone," said Fulger.

An age passed. Other men listened casually to the knocking for a minute or two and said, "It's nothing, kid: you've got the jitters."

"Listen again," said Rob. "I've been lying here for hours and hours. You can't hear when there are other noises. It's too faint."

At last one of them said, "Hear that? The kid might be right."

"I think that old beggar who was hanging around at Vigo may have got in."

"He'll have to stay there till we dock."

"Why?"

"There's no way into that hold except through the hatch. That's why. And it's got a deck cargo on top of it."

The men came and went in the foc'sle. Now they were fetching plates of food from the galley, and drinking tea out of pint-sized mugs. They talked. They turned on the wireless. How could they talk and eat when that man was perhaps shut up in the hold?

Now the light was dimmed. Somebody was snoring. *Knock*, *knock*, *knock*—there it was again. *Knock*, *knock*. Oh, please, God, thought Rob, show me what to do. Now. Show me.

His mind went through the steel dividing wall into the hold. The packing-cases had shifted in the storm. He had heard them. The man was lying pinned, a leg crushed. He could not reach the food and water he had brought with him. Fulger whimpered. The other men slept.

Dozing, sleeping, waking, Rob realized that the engines of the ship had almost stopped. Was it possible that they were putting into a port?

The bosun looked round the doorway.

"What's the slow-down for, Jack?"

"Too much head wind. We're just keeping her head into the weather."

"What about *me*?" said Fulger, from his corner. "We'll

be a muckin' week getting home at this rate. Trying to save fuel, that's all it is. May God forgive him's all I say."

The *Millie* crashed and slopped up and down in the seas, making no headway.

Rob turned in his bunk and fell half asleep. He was under the water and everything was darkness and uneasy movement. Now he was in a street at home, arguing with his father. Here was Fulger holding up his arm mutilated and tattered like a bunch of red seaweed. Surely there must be light somewhere, and not only this grey evil dimness. . . . .

There were images of dead men in his eyes. Here was the old beggar himself. He drifted through the water, and his face was lighted by phosphorus, showing every grey bristle on his chin. He sank away with a cry, and Rob knew that he was dying. Then he was startlingly awake again, and the light was out save for one dim blue bulb, and the other men were snoring.

Captain Broad, sitting up suddenly in his bunk where he had been fast asleep, found his nephew standing before him. He saw the boy was pale from prolonged sickness.

"Why do you come here?" he said. "I told you to treat me as if you were an ordinary member of the crew. What the hell do you want?"

"There's a man in the hold, sir," said Rob. "He's dying; we've got to get him out."

"Why doesn't Jack Simmons come and tell me? Anyway, the mate's up on the bridge."

Captain Broad listened to Rob and then said, "Do you expect me to give orders to shift that deck cargo, with this sea running, and then take the hatch off? Perhaps you'd like to?"

Nevertheless, half an hour later the captain came to the foc'sle himself. "What's this about a man in the hold? Rob tells me you've been hearing tapping."

"*He's* been hearing tapping," said one of them. "Not steady enough to be made by a man."

The men woke up and listened. But there was no tapping to be heard; nothing now but the crash of the waves and the throb of the slowly running engines.

"Wind's dropping," said the captain. "We'll go ahead again."

The next day the wind grew less all the time. The sky began to clear, and it was summer weather again. Rob ate, and felt a new man, and by the time he saw the blue of the deep ocean turn to the cloudy green of coastal waters, he began to think the whole thing had been a bad dream.

Old Jack Simmons the bosun talked to him in a friendly way. He said it had not been much of a storm, really. He

asked him about his parents; laughed at him about the girl at Vigo, and told him he was too apt to imagine things.

"You've got to learn to see things straight," he said. "A few more trips with us'll knock these funny ideas out of your head."

"Suits me," said Rob. He asked a great many questions about the tides and the working of the ship, and the cargo of pit-props and turpentine they had taken on board; till Jack Simmons told him he was trying to go too fast about it.

Now they were running up the Bristol Channel again, and Rob saw that his first voyage was coming to an end. Of course he would go again. He would persuade his uncle to take him as a regular hand. In a couple of voyages' time his neck would stop looking white in a sailor's jersey.

As soon as they docked he went to find a post office and send a postcard home. Coming back along the quayside, he saw that a small crowd had collected alongside the *Millie*.

"There's something up over there," said a bystander. "I heard someone say they'd found a dead man in the hold of that boat."

Rob could say nothing in reply. He hated the very thought of going to look. Yet he knew that he must. He must see with his own eyes the proof of what had happened.

He edged his way through the knot of people, and there on the flagstones of the quayside, with a dozen or fifteen men standing round, lay the dead figure. For the moment no one was speaking. They were taking in the details.

It was not the beggar who had spoken to him at Vigo. It was not a man at all. It was a girl.

She lay there staring, her jaw dropped, her face white in death. There was a terrible gash on her forehead and a dark jelly of blood was matted with the red-brown hair.

Rob stared. He was slow to understand what his eyes were telling him. This was the girl he had spoken to, the girl whose address he had in his pocket. Yet it was not her at all. Now he saw she was coarser-featured, much older than he thought, with smears of make-up still on her dead face, a prostitute, perhaps. In the evening light she had tricked him, played with him.

Yet she had lain in the hold, died within a few yards of his bunk. He had heard her knocking out her last hours. He alone, among all those older men, had been right: and nothing had been done for her. Nothing. Nothing.

The quayside with the group of silent men, the sunken railway

lines embedded in the paving stones, grew into an immense length, stretching on for ever. An overpowering pain seized Rob. It seemed that he was far from the dockside, and that he had become this girl's agony as she had lain and knocked for two days and nights.

He turned away. Now the crowd was breaking up. He saw Captain Broad, talking angrily to Stannet, holding him by the arm.

"This is your doing, Stannet," said his uncle. "You ought to be gaoled for this."

Stannet looked back at Captain Broad. "Go on," he said coolly. "You can't pin anything on me."

At these words Rob's thoughts almost overcame him. All that woman's suffering went for nothing with Stannet: why, he was worse than Fulger.

He saw a metal block and a broken length of chain lying at his feet. For a wild moment he fought with his need to pick it up and swing it at Stannet and smash his head open, shouting, "Yes, I can pin this on you!"

But Stannet went on talking. "Why," he said, in the same sneering tone of voice, "that kid knows more about it than me. He knew she was there all the time."

"Stop that!" shouted Captain Broad, and called Stannet an indecent name. "Rob did his best. He came and told me."

"O.K., O.K.," said Stannet. "But you can't pin anything on me."

Rob wandered off, up the quayside. He no longer wanted to be like Stannet. Yet Stannet's accusing words struck him. Perhaps he himself was the guilty one. "Oh, what must I do now?" he asked himself.

He turned and saw that two men had brought a stretcher, and were lifting the stiffened, awkward corpse on to it. Rob pushed aside the man who was at the head of the stretcher.

"Let me help," he said.

Now they went along the quayside. The head moved slightly, and the face touched his hand. Rob moved his grip, so that his finger pressed against the cold cheek; closer and closer, till underneath the covering blanket his hand was caressing the dead face. This much at least he could do to ease the passion of grief and sympathy that he experienced.

★ ★ ★

When you have finished reading this copy of ARGOSY, *why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?*

GLORIA!

Can I not sing Ut Hoy,
Whan the joly shepard made so much joy?

The shepard on a hill he stode;
Roûnd about him his shepe they yode;
He put his hond under his hode,
He saw a star as rede as blode.
Ut hoy!
For in his pipe he made so much joy.

The shepard said anon right,
"I will go see yon ferly sight,
Whereas the angel singeth on hight,
And the star that shineth so bright!"
Ut hoy!
For in his pipe he made so much joy . . .

"Now must I go there Crist was born;
Farewell! I cum again to morn.
Dog, kepe well my shepe fro the corn,
And warn well 'Warrocke' when I blow my horn!"
Ut hoy!
For in his pipe he made so much joy.

Author Unknown,
from a 15th-century MS.

Christmas Day—

About six o'clock on Christmas Day, I was awakened by a sweet singing under my window. Surprised at a visit so early and unexpected, I arose, and looking out of the window I beheld six young women, and four men, welcoming with sweet music the blessed morn . . .

From *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1811

—In the Morning

However much one groaned about it beforehand, however much one hated making arrangements and doing up parcels and ordering several days' meals in advance—when it actually happened Christmas Day was always fun.

It began in the same way every year: the handle of her bedroom door being turned just loudly enough to wake her up,

but softly enough not to count as waking her up on purpose; Toby glimmering like a moth in the dark doorway, clutching a nobbly Christmas stocking in one hand and holding up his pyjama trousers with the other. (He insisted upon pyjamas, but he had not yet outgrown his sleeping-suit figure.)

"Toby! It's only just after six. I did say not till seven."

"But, Mummy, I can't tell the time." He was barefoot and shivering, and his eyes were like stars.

"Come here, and get warm, you little *goat*." He was into her bed in a flash, stocking and all. The tail of a clockwork dog scratched her shoulder. A few moments later another head appeared round the door, a little higher up.

"Judy, darling, it's *too* early, honestly."

"I know, but I heard Toby come in, so I knew you must be awake."

"All right, you can come into bed, but you've got to keep quiet for a bit. Daddy's still asleep."

And then a third head, higher up still, and Vin's voice, even deeper than it had been at Long Leave.

"I say, are the others in here? I thought I heard them."

He curled himself up on the foot of his father's bed. And by that time, of course, Clem was awake too. The old transparent stratagem had worked to perfection once more: there was nothing for it but to switch on the lights, shut the windows, and admit that Christmas Day had insidiously but definitely begun.

JAN STRUTHER, *Mrs. Miniver*

Mekyl Melody

I saw a fayr maydyn syttyn and synge
sche lullyd a lytyl chyld a swete lordyng,
Lullay, myn lyking, my dere sone, myn swetyng,
Lullay my dere herte, myn owyn dere derlyng . . .

Ther was mekyl melody at that chyldes berthe
all tho wern in hevene blys thei made mekyl merthe,
Lullay, myn lyking, my dere sone, myn swetyng,
Lullay my dere herte, myn owyn dere derlyng.

Aungele bryht thei song that nyt and seyde to that chyld,
blyssid be thou and so be sche that is bothe mek and myld.
Lullay, myn lyking, my dere sone, myn swetyng,
Lullay my dere herte, myn owyn dere derlyng.

Author Unknown,
Fifteenth Century

Joy shall be Theirs

It was a pretty sight, and a seasonable one, that met their eyes when they flung the door open. In the forecourt, lit by the dim rays of a horn lantern, some eight or ten little field-mice stood in a semi-circle, red worsted comforters round their throats, their fore-paws thrust deep into their pockets, their feet jigging for warmth. With bright beady eyes they glanced shyly at each other, sniggering a little, sniffing and applying coat-sleeves a good deal. As the door opened, one of the elder ones that carried the lantern was just saying, " Now then, one, two, three ! " and forthwith their shrill little voices uprose on the air, singing one of the old-time carols that their forefathers composed in fields that were fallow and held by frost . . .

Goodman Joseph toiled through the snow—
Saw the star o'er a stable low;
Mary she might not further go—
Welcome thatch, and litter below !
Joy was hers in the morning !

And then they heard the angels tell
" Who were the first to cry Nowell ?
Animals all, as it befell,
In the stable where they did dwell !
Joy shall be theirs in the morning ! "

The voices ceased, the singers, bashful but smiling, exchanged sidelong glances, and silence succeeded—but for a moment only. Then, from up above and far away, down the tunnel they had so lately travelled was borne to their ears in a faint musical hum the sound of distant bells ringing a joyful and clangorous peal.

KENNETH GRAHAME, *The Wind in the Willows*

Glory to God—

I satt in companyes of worldly myrthe and I fand noghte Jhesu . . . Therefore I turnede by anothire waye, and I ran abowte be Poverte, and I fand Jhesu pure, borne in the worlde, laid in a crybe and lappid in clathis.

RICHARD ROLLE *of Hampole*, c. 1300-49

—In the Highest

Thousand cherubim, thousand seraphim
Hover high above the mighty Lord of love.
Sleep, King of angels, sleep !

From an Old French carol

BAYSWATER TAPESTRY

"Miss Tibbett," he said, in an awful voice, "what is the meaning of this carousal?"

by LANGSTON DAY

OF all the families who resided in Bayswater, none was more respected than the Pettywood family. Mr. Pettywood had short, black whiskers and long hair which he parted in the middle with hair oil. His wife dressed elegantly and wore very tight stays which made her inclined to faint. She obeyed her husband more from indolence than from belief in his infallibility. Mr. Pettywood, as she knew, was a Person of Principle, though not quite so much of a one as Grandmamma Pettywood, who had come to live in the house when Grandpapa died.

But Charlie Pettywood, Mr. Pettywood's younger brother, was not a Person of Principle at all, and it was rather surprising that he was allowed to live in such an upright household. Perhaps it was because he was Grandmamma's favourite son and because the old lady always had her own way.

At all events, there he was, and although he often spoke airily about the fortune he was going to make when conditions were more favourable, he never did any work at all as far as the children could see. And this, they thought, was a most deplorable thing because, as Papa often told them, only those who worked hard and made good would go to Heaven. Percy and Ernestine, who were good children, would sometimes pray for Uncle Charlie when they said their prayers at night, but Marmaduke who was not a good child, did not pray for him.

One afternoon when their governess, Miss Tibbett, was getting ready to take them out for a walk in the Park, Marmaduke slipped upstairs and hid in the attic. Down below he could hear her calling him, and Percy and Ernestine shrilly echoing his name. He kept quite still and presently their piping voices died away. When he was sure they had gone out he set about the business he had in mind.

Half buried under a heap of bric-à-brac lay a large wooden travelling box which, as he knew, had belonged to Grandmamma's brother, Great-Uncle Tobias. He had always taken a special interest in Great-Uncle Tobias because he had heard Grandmamma say that he was a black sheep, and he thought it

a most extraordinary thing to have a sheep for a relative. What is more, this remarkable creature had travelled about the world (so she said) and had brought back this box from Arabia. Marmaduke was so curious to find out what sorts of things a sheep collected that he had stolen a screwdriver in order to remove the padlock and peep inside. The screws had rusted and it was some little time before he could get them out; but at last he succeeded, and with a quickly beating heart he lifted the lid.

At first sight the contents of the box were rather disappointing. There was a quantity of tropical kit, moth-eaten and musty, some books with pictures of queer-shaped ladies without very many clothes on, some odds and ends of harness, a camel bell, a sun-helmet, and a saucepan. But lower down he found something more exciting : a rusty sword, a hookah, and a horse pistol.

Marmaduke considered what he should do. He felt tempted to take the sword and the pistol down to Miss Tibbett's room, which was just off the foot of the attic stairs, and examine them in a better light, but Grandmamma was pottering about, attending to her window-boxes and if she caught him she would certainly confiscate what he had found. The hookah was a beauty and it might be possible to steal a fill of tobacco from Uncle Charlie. But the situation was full of danger; he must play for safety.

So he put the things back in the box and stole down to his bedroom where he carefully washed his face and hands. The next thing was to provide an alibi. He boldly accosted his grandmother and offered to carry up cans of water from below. The old lady looked at him sharply but accepted his offer, with the result that when Miss Tibbett returned and saw what he was doing she dared not complain about his having played truant.

Several times in the next few days Marmaduke stole up to the attic to look at his treasures. Then one Saturday afternoon the grown-ups, except for Uncle Charlie, went out to pay some calls and he seized his opportunity.

The things, he found, were in the box just as he had left them. Tying the pistol to his waist with a piece of string, he clapped the saucepan on his head for a helmet, and seizing the sword he sallied forth in search of his brother and sister. Miss Tibbett was shut in her room reading a book called *The Gentleman from Bombay, or the Romantic Adventure of Emilina Fanshawe*, so Percy and Ernestine were alone in the garden. He rushed upon them yelling that he was Akbar Khan, the great Afghan Chief, and that they were the miserable remnants of the British Army retreating from Kabul, whereupon the silly little things ran away screaming. Flushed with victory, Marmaduke

retired to the potting-shed to increase his armament with a hand-fork, but as he took down the fork from its peg, the handle of it chanced to knock the saucepan which was still on his head and at once a most peculiar thing happened.

A column of dun-coloured smoke billowed up from the floor and out of it appeared the figure of an enormous jinnee, naked save for a loin cloth. He had a coal-black skin, a curved pair of horns, and a face as ugly as it is possible to imagine.

" Peace be on thee, Effendi," he said in a voice like crackling faggots. " On my head and eyes be thy command."

Marmaduke was so startled that he was speechless. But he was made of tougher stuff than his brother and sister, and presently curiosity overcame his fear.

" What made you come ? " he asked.

" He whose head is covered with the cook-pot of Zabba-shalook has but to strike it once, and this slave must appear on the wings of celerity to execute his commands."

" Can you get me anything I want ? "

The jinnee gravely signified affirmation.

" Well, bring me a horse to ride—one that will gallop fast."

" I hear and obey," said the jinnee ; and kissing the ground between his hands, he vanished. Marmaduke was awhirl with excitement but he managed to keep his wits about him. Creeping up the backstairs he replaced the sword, the pistol, and the saucepan in the travelling box, tiptoed down past Miss Tibbett's room, and returned to the garden unobserved.

About an hour and a half later he was in the yard when the landau rumbled over the cobbles and pulled up at the side door. Papa and Fred the groom were on the box; Mamma and Grandmamma were sitting inside, stiff and dignified, Mamma wearing a poke bonnet and a smart Andalusian cloak of satin.

His father took no notice of him. Jumping down from his seat, he ran his hand down the fetlock of one of the horses and accused Fred of allowing him to go lame. But his mother exclaimed: " Marmaduke, where is your cap ? And pray what have you been doing to soil your suit ? I declare, you look as disreputable as a child of the Lower Classes ! "

Marmaduke shuffled his feet uncomfortably, but at this moment he heard the clippety-clop of a horse's hoofs on the cobbles, and looking round, what should he see but a turbaned man with flowing black moustaches and a sword swinging at his side, leading into the yard a pure white stallion which curvetted about in the most exciting way ? His saddle-cloth was a piece of rich oriental tapestry and his saddle, which had a high cantle, gleamed with inlaid jewels.

Mr. and Mrs. Pettywood, Grandmamma, and Fred turned round and stared at the newcomer in amazement.

The man with the sword, who looked exceedingly fierce, approached Marmaduke and with a deep salaam said: "I come, Young Master, at the bidding of the most potent Zabba-shalook to execute thy commands."

Mr. Pettywood was the first to recover his breath. "What is the meaning of this mummery?" he asked indignantly.

The sice ignored him utterly.

"Who are you and where d'ye come from, hey?" Mr. Pettywood snapped. The man remained as immovable and expressionless as a statue, waiting for Marmaduke to speak.

Fred, who had ambled round to where he stood, looked admiringly at the beautiful stallion and patted his back, whereat the servant of the jinnee laid his hand on his sword-hilt and turned upon him so ferociously that he recoiled in alarm. Even Mr. Pettywood was taken aback; his wife threatened to faint.

Then Grandmamma spoke. "Young man," she said, "I think you have come to the wrong address."

But he took no more notice of her than of a fly.

During this extraordinary conversation Percy and Ernestine had come into the yard and they now stood behind their father, wide-eyed with astonishment. The cook, the parlour maid, the kitchen maid, the scullery maid, the boot boy, and Burfoot the butler also came into the yard to stare. Miss Tibbett, following Percy and Ernestine, gazed flutteringly at the oriental's brown skin and flowing moustaches; he seemed to her to bear a thrilling resemblance to Augustus, the gentleman from Bombay.

Finally Uncle Charlie, who had just woken up from a late afternoon nap, strolled out of the house yawning. "Hullo!" he exclaimed with a whistle of admiration. "Nice bit of horse-flesh this. Where's he come from, a circus?"

"A circus!" cried his brother, suddenly finding his tongue again. "That's about what it is. This fellow takes my house for a circus. What the devil— "

"George," Grandmamma interrupted sharply, "be silent!"

"This young man," she explained to Uncle Charlie, "declares that he has brought the animal for Marmaduke. It is useless your attempting to speak to him because he will not reply."

"H'm," said Uncle Charlie, thinking what a dash he would cut on the stallion. "Well, Marmaduke, you'd better tell him to leave it here."

"This is intolerable!" fumed Mr. Pettywood. "'Pon my soul, I— " but Grandmamma quelled him with a glance.

Everyone looked at Marmaduke.

"Will you leave the horse here, please," he said nervously.

Instantly the servant of the jinnee handed the bridle to Fred, salaamed to Marmaduke, and looking neither to the right nor the left, strode out of the yard.

And there the matter rested. Fred put the horse in the stables, Uncle Charlie rode him every morning in Rotten Row to the unbounded admiration of the ladies, while his brother waited for someone to come and claim him, fully resolved to charge them a thumping fee for the feeding and care of him; but nobody came. As for Marmaduke, when he asked permission to ride the stallion he was sternly refused.

Now this seemed to him most unjust because, after all, the horse was rightfully his. So, to relieve his feelings, he behaved very badly. He pummelled Percy with his fists and pulled Ernestine's hair until she screamed. He played truant on Sunday when his father read Bishop Bodger's collected sermons to Miss Tibbett and the children. He placed tin-tacks on Uncle Charlie's chair at the dinner table, hoping to prevent him from riding.

As a punishment for this last outrage he was left behind with Miss Tibbett when the family drove out for their annual picnic to Richmond Park. Miss Tibbett stayed at home, partly because she had a headache and partly because it was felt that so depraved a character as Marmaduke must be kept under strict supervision.

Now, although it is depressing to see your brother and sister setting off for a treat with expressions of conscious virtue while you are left behind in disgrace, it is not quite so bad when you know that you have a powerful jinnee at your beck and call who is able to do almost anything you tell him. Marmaduke chuckled to think that if he chose he could have his parents turned into blackamoors, Grandmamma into a camel, and Percy and Ernestine into little pigs. He almost decided to give the order; it would certainly spoil their picnic; but on second thoughts he felt it would be more fun to ask for something else for himself.

So after lunch he crept up to the attic, took the saucepan out of the box, clapped it on his head and knocked it with the mouthpiece of the hookah. Up rose the column of smoke disclosing the swarthy figure of the jinnee who inquired in his deep, crackly voice what his wishes might be.

"Bring me some sweets," replied Marmaduke. "Some Turkish delight, crystallized fruit, and things like that."

"Hearkening and obedience," said the jinnee.

"I want a good lot," Marmaduke added, thinking that he had better make allowances for having most of it confiscated.

The jinnee inclined his head, kissed the ground between his hands, and disappeared.

At this point Marmaduke should have put the saucepan back in the box and returned to the garden where he had been told to amuse himself quietly, but the temptation to stay in the attic was too much for him. He had not yet explored the box properly and quite possibly it contained other things which he had overlooked. He began to unpack it, hardly noticing how the time was passing.

Meanwhile, Miss Tibbett, having finished her book, looked into the garden to make sure that Marmaduke was not up to some fresh mischief, but she could not see him anywhere. She called him, but received no answer. A thorough search of the arbours and shrubberies drew a blank. She went into the house and looked in the most likely places, calling loudly, but he was nowhere to be found.

None of the servants had seen him. With her growing alarm, the headache became worse and she went to her room for her smelling-salts.

Just as she reached the door she heard suspicious sounds from the top of the stairs leading to the attic.

"Marmaduke!" she called sharply, and at once there was dead silence. She went quickly up the stairs.

There was no time for Marmaduke to cram the things back into the box before she was upon him. Perhaps if she had not had a headache or if he had not already been in disgrace, she would not have been so severe with him, but as it was, she threatened to send him to bed at once and report the matter to his father the moment he returned. For Miss Tibbett had also heard of Great-Uncle Tobias, and she knew that Grandmamma had given strict orders that the box was not to be touched.

Like other malefactors who have been cornered, Marmaduke was filled with a blind rage. His first impulse was to snatch up the pistol and shoot his governess; but this was impossible for he had no cartridges. Then his mind flew to the sword, but it was heavy and cumbersome, and Miss Tibbett was much stronger than himself.

But what about the saucepan? It was still on his head and all he had to do was to bang it with his knuckles. He did so, and immediately a dun-coloured cloud of smoke billowed up from the floor and the jinnee's deep voice boomed out: "Peace be upon thee, Effendi. What is thy will?"

So quickly had things happened that Marmaduke had no plan in his mind beyond a vague wish to have Miss Tibbett removed to some distant cannibal island, and while he hesitated she screamed and ran down the stairs as if the Devil in the Bishop's sermons were after her. So Marmaduke replied: "It's all

right, thank you, I don't need anything more just now," and the jinnee salaamed and disappeared. After putting the things back in the box, he closed the lid and returned to the garden.

Miss Tibbett lay back in her shabby armchair in a half-swoon, wondering whether she had been visited by a hallucination. After a few minutes she felt pretty certain that she had not. In that case she really had seen Marmaduke summon a jinnee by rapping a saucepan belonging to Great-Uncle Tobias, after putting it on his head; and the jinnee had appeared.

Good gracious, this explained the extraordinary visit of the man with the Arab horse! Less than ten yards from where she sat was a magic saucepan which could make her as powerful as Queen Victoria. The thought was so dazzling that she could hardly grasp it. All her life she had been thwarted and deprived of the things which other women enjoyed. Now, perhaps, her luck had changed.

She heard Marmaduke come down the attic stairs and go softly past her room. She must seize her opportunity before the party returned. What should she ask the jinnee to do for her? Bring her a sack of jewels? Awkward questions might be asked about how she had got them. Transform her into the most beautiful lady in England? Doubts might be raised about her identity, and great beauty, she had heard, was rather dangerous. Make her a duchess? It was an alluring prospect.

Miss Tibbett stared thoughtfully at the wallpaper with its design of exhausted purple foliage. It would be worth a good deal to look down on the Pettywoods from the top of the social ladder, but dukes she imagined were formidable men who were not very easy to manage. It might be wiser to order a plain husband, virtuous, steady-going and possessed of a comfortable fortune invested in consols.

How she had the courage to return to the attic, put the saucepan on her head, summon the jinnee, and ask him to provide such a commodity, it is hard to say; but this is what she did, and as an afterthought she added, blushing: "I should like him to be a gentleman from India."

"My head is between thy hands, O Moon-faced and Virtuous," the jinnee replied, and with a deep obeisance he vanished.

Marmaduke meanwhile wandered disconsolately about the garden. He had got the better of Miss Tibbett for the time being, but he was not so silly as to imagine that he would not have to pay for it later. As soon as the picnic party returned she would sneak on him and there would follow one of those awful judicial trials which his father was so fond of conducting.

But presently he heard her calling him, and when he went to her she smiled at him and gave him a glass of lemon syrup. Her headache seemed to have gone and she was in the best of tempers. She promised to take him to see the Panorama; and when the others came back she evidently said nothing about the jinnee because there was no summons to his father's study.

But next morning, soon after Papa had left for the City, there came a loud knock on the front door, and when Bridget the parlour-maid opened it a gigantic Arab in a brown burnous inquired for "Marmaduke Effendi." Uncle Charlie with his hands in his pockets was whistling and staring out of the window. He saw a string of camels laden with great boxes.

By the time that Uncle Charlie, Mrs. Pettywood, and Grandmamma had come to the door, with Miss Tibbett, Percy, and Ernestine gaping at the camels from an upstairs window, and the servants crowded together goggling through the yard gates, a large number of spectators had gathered in the street. But Marmaduke after one look was overcome with panic and fled to the nursery.

Uncle Charlie tried hard to persuade the man in charge of the convoy to go away. "There must be some mistake, my good fellow," he kept saying. "This is not a wholesale stores."

Grandmamma pushed him aside. "Young man," she said to the Arab in charge, "if this is a joke it is in deplorably poor taste." The man paid not the least attention to either of them but asked again for Marmaduke Effendi. The crowd outside increased rapidly and Mrs. Pettywood showed signs of preparing to faint. It is useless to argue with a man who will not reply, so at length Miss Tibbett was sent to find Marmaduke. In a few minutes she came back leading a sullen and rebellious-looking Marmaduke by the hand.

The sice of the camels salaamed and kissed the ground before him. "What are thy noble commands for the disposal of these sweetmeats, O Nephew of a Good Uncle?" he inquired.

"Tell him to take them away at once," snapped Grandmamma. But Marmaduke did not do so. He realized with a delicious feeling of power that this man who carried a curved scimitar would do exactly what he ordered and that none of these grown-ups could prevent it.

"Put them in the coach-house," he said.

"Marmaduke!" cried his mother, giving him a shake. "Mr. Pettywood shall hear of this."

Grandmamma compressed her lips but said nothing.

The servant of the jinnee shouted an order to his drivers, who

led their camels into the yard, unloaded the boxes and stacked them to the roof of the coach-house, utterly ignoring the angry protestations of Fred.

After the camels had gone, Mrs. Pettywood complained of feeling ill and went upstairs to rest, while Marmaduke was given a lesson by Miss Tibbett in the Rule of Three. But Uncle Charlie prized open one of the boxes and found it full of the most delicious Turkish delight he had ever tasted. He ate so much of it that he had no appetite for luncheon.

Marmaduke had little appetite either, for now that his secret was shared by Miss Tibbett he felt uneasy. True, she had not yet sneaked on him but it could not be long before she did so, and then good-bye to the saucepan and the jinnee! But was it not possible to take the saucepan from the attic and hide it in some safer place, such as the potting-shed? So long as only he knew where it was, he could defy the whole household.

The weather was hot and after lunch the grown-ups retired for a siesta. Marmaduke stole up to the attic and was relieved to find the saucepan still in the box. He took it out and crept down again. Nobody saw him until he was outside the house, but on his way across the yard his luck deserted him for he ran into Martha, the kitchen maid.

"Lawk-a-mussy, what's the young warmint stole now?" she exclaimed, running out. Seizing the saucepan, she took it into the kitchen and clapped it on a shelf along with a number of pans which closely resembled it.

Marmaduke was nonplussed. He dared not tell her that the saucepan did not belong to the kitchen or the cat would be out of the bag. The only thing to do was to say nothing and watch for an opportunity of stealing into the kitchen to recover it.

Meanwhile, Uncle Charlie who, although lazy, was no fool, had been doing some thinking. Something uncanny was happening in the house. What was the meaning of this Arab fellow coming into the yard with a blood stallion and refusing to listen to anyone but Marmaduke? And what the deuce had possessed a convoy of camels to deliver a load of sweetmeats big enough to feed a seraglio? And once again, it was only from Marmaduke they would take orders.

He had read about jinnees when he was a boy. Had his young scapegrace of a nephew stumbled upon a magic lamp or something? He must certainly find out, for there was no doubt that he himself could put a jinnee to very good use indeed.

So he waylaid Marmaduke and took him to the coach-house where they both stuffed themselves with Turkish delight, and

after this he took him out for a ride on the stallion. Marmaduke, of course, was delighted and it was not long before Uncle Charlie had wheedled his secret out of him, including his unfortunate encounter with Martha.

"Does anyone else know about the saucepan?" he asked anxiously. Marmaduke related the alarming incident concerning Miss Tibbett.

Uncle Charlie whistled softly and stroked his moustache. "I shouldn't breathe a word to anyone," he said. "It will only get you into trouble with your Grandma. Trust your uncle."

He turned the stallion round and led him back home. When they came into the yard he saw that the kitchen was abustle with servants preparing dinner, so he reluctantly abandoned any idea of trying to filch the saucepan until the next day.

The Pettywood family dined early, and it being a fine evening of summer there was plenty of daylight after dinner before the household retired to bed. Miss Tibbett went up to her room and fell into a pleasant reverie: The children were in bed. Nobody, for once, had asked her to do any irksome favours for them. Through her open window a turtle-dove cooed seductively from the garden. She was at peace.

But not for long. Suddenly there was a whirr, and in through the window flew the jinnee, carrying in his hairy black arms a gentleman of about forty-five years of age, portly, sunburnt, with prominent pale blue eyes and a heavy sandy moustache. No sooner did the jinnee release him than the gentleman, who was dressed in white drill, collapsed like a sawdust soldier.

The jinnee glared at him with eyes shooting fire-sparks of anger. "Woe to thee, O thou of accursed forefathers!" he roared. "Do that in which I have instructed thee!"

The gentleman, who was as confused as a barn owl in daylight, did not stir, whereupon the jinnee drew a scimitar and seemed about to decapitate him on the spot. Miss Tibbett screamed.

Then the gentleman, as if acting in a dream, sank down on his knees before Miss Tibbett and stammered: "Madam—I-I—er—er—w-will you c-consider an honourable p-proposal of matrimony?" Having blurted out these words, he stole an uneasy glance at the jinnee, who in his turn looked at Miss Tibbett as if anxious to know whether she was satisfied.

Miss Tibbett said faintly: "Thank you, that will do." The jinnee salaamed and disappeared.

Then Miss Tibbett did something she had not done for a very long time—she burst into tears.

The gentleman whom the jinnee had brought was at first too much distraught to notice her He stood by the window breath-

ing heavily as if he had just been chased by a tiger. But presently, becoming aware of Miss Tibbett's tears, he said awkwardly: "Pray compose yourself, madam, pray compose yourself!" And when she continued to sob he added: "I—er—hrrrrmp! You have not such a thing as a drop of brandy, I suppose? A chota of brandy is a capital thing, capital. 'Pon my soul, I should welcome one myself."

Naturally, Miss Tibbett had no such thing in her room, but she knew where the invalid brandy was kept; and as at that moment she longed more than anything in the world to escape and recover her self-possession, she was thankful to take the opportunity. So, praying her visitor to excuse her, she left the room, and in five minutes she returned with a bottle and two tumblers. The brandy was cheap and raw, but a little of it made Miss Tibbett feel much better and a lot of it loosened the gentleman's tongue.

"Where am I?" he asked suddenly. "What has happened to the ship?" While Miss Tibbett was trying to think of how to reply, he went on: "A rum thing happened to me just now, doosed rum. While I was up on deck something swooped down on me and carried me off. At first I thought it was some sort of a bird, but it couldn't have been a bird because it spoke to me. As it flew with me over the water it kept saying something like: 'When I conduct thee to the Honoured Lady, O Bald-head of Jahannam, speak words of love to her, and be thy wit preserved from witlessness.'"

Miss Tibbett blew her nose to conceal her blushes.

"A queer dream, was it not?" said the gentleman, emptying his glass and refilling it. But with his glass raised halfway to his mouth a puzzled expression crossed his face. "If it was *a* dream," he said, "I suppose I am still dreaming now?"

"No, you are *not* dreaming," said Miss Tibbett firmly.

He thought this over for a few moments. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said suddenly. "James Pottinger, District Magistrate of Cunda-bunda."

Miss Tibbett rose and they gravely shook hands.

"Not that introductions are really necessary in dreams," he added. "You discover yourself conversing with an elegant female, just as I am doing now, and you behave very much as you would if you were awake—though, to be sure, it wouldn't much matter *how* you behaved because, after all, it *is* only a dream."

"But you are *not* dreaming, I do assure you," said Miss Tibbett on a note of alarm.

Mr. Pottinger smiled. "It is an uncommonly vivid dream, I allow, but this flying through the air is quite familiar to me. I

put it down to my weakness for curry. In a few moments I shall wake up, I make no doubt; but may I add that I am by no means in a hurry to do so?" Miss Tibbett lowered her eyes modestly, and at this moment she heard heavy footsteps outside. Somebody knocked at the door.

So many strange things had happened in the last two days that she was growing accustomed to emergencies. She pushed her tumbler under her chair and Mr. Pottinger into the hanging cupboard, hissing in his ear: "Keep quiet, I implore you."

The door closed on him and he found himself in faintly scented darkness. The dream was becoming unpleasant and he pinched himself in order to wake up.

Now, the new visitor was Mr. Pettywood, who on returning from the City had immediately been told about the arrival of the camels and the sweetmeats. What in heaven's name was the meaning of this, he wondered.

If there was one thing Mr. Pettywood disliked, it was for something to happen under his roof which he could not understand. The matter must be cleared up. A judicial inquiry was called for. Since Marmaduke was in bed he would begin with the governess.

So when Miss Tibbett admitted him into her room he settled himself comfortably in her armchair, leaving her standing, and placing the tips of his fingers together, said: "Now, Miss Tibbett, I want you to describe in your own words exactly what occurred this morning."

She began to tell him somewhat confusedly, stammering and fumbling for words.

But Mr. Pettywood did not listen to her for long, because his nose detected a distinct odour of brandy, and to confirm his suspicions he beheld a tumbler on the dresser. He rose, picked it up, and sniffed it.

"I was feeling faint," Miss Tibbett quavered, "so I took a little of the brandy which is kept for emergencies."

"I hope you asked permission to do so?"

"I fear I did not, sir."

"That is presuming somewhat on your situation, I think," said her employer, glancing sharply round the room. His eye fell upon the empty bottle; he picked it up and held it before her accusingly. "A *little* brandy, do you say? It strikes me that you place a strange construction on the word."

"Indeed, sir, there was very little liquor in the bottle," said Miss Tibbett recklessly.

Mr. Pettywood uttered a slight snort and sat down again. As he did so his heel struck something under the chair and stooping

he picked up a second tumbler. The implications were so grave that for a few moments he could not find his tongue.

"Miss Tibbett," he said at length in an awful voice, "what is the meaning of this carousal?"

Poor Miss Tibbett stood before him trembling and blushing, unable to say a word.

"I am waiting for your reply," said her employer icily.

During this conversation Mr. Pottinger had given up pinching himself, partly because it did not wake him up and partly because he became interested in the dialogue which he could hear indistinctly through the walls of taffeta and satin. It soon became obvious that this nice-looking young hostess of his was being bullied by some male intruder with an unpleasantly harsh voice, and this aroused Mr. Pottinger's feelings of chivalry.

Of course, it was only a dream and he would presently be awoken by the cabin steward with his little jug of hot water for shaving, but meanwhile this cupboard was suffocating him and the cramped position was giving him an infernal crick in the neck.

So he flung open the door and stepped heavily out. "I don't know who you are, sir," he said to Mr. Pettywood, "but I shall trouble you to speak more civilly to this lady."

"Who the devil are you, sir?" snapped Mr. Pettywood, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

"James Pottinger, District Magistrate of Cunda-bunda, and very much at your service."

"What are you doing in my house?"

"I came here in a dream, sir."

Mr. Pettywood glared at him. "Are you drunk?"

Mr. Pottinger flushed angrily. "I have dreamed, sir, of pythons and crocodiles," he said, "and even of blue-faced cannibals with their heads turned back to front; but in all my experience I have never dreamed of anything more unpleasant than yourself."

"Leave my house!" roared Mr. Pettywood in a fury.

"With the greatest of pleasure," Mr. Pottinger replied, bowing stiffly. "I have no doubt that the Thingamebob which brought me here, the—er—the——"

"Jinnee," said Miss Tibbett.

"Jinnee, was it? Well, I have no doubt he will call shortly and take me back to my ship."

A moment before, Mr. Pettywood's face had been contorted with rage, but now suddenly his anger vanished. It had been blown away by that one word "jinnee." Up to that moment nothing had made any sense, but now all these irritating enigmas —the arrival of the stallion, the delivery of the sweetmeats, and

the sudden appearance of a maniac in white drill in the governess's bed-sitting-room—were solved in a single flash of illumination.

"Pray forgive my—my precipitancy, sir," he said in an altered tone. "My name is Pettywood. It is not unknown in the City, I think." Almost unconsciously, he assumed the tight-lipped expression he wore at company meetings. "Would you care to come down to the smoking-room?"

"With pleasure," said Mr. Pottinger; and down they went, leaving Miss Tibbett in a state of agitation hard to describe.

As Mr. Pettywood listened to the District Magistrate's story his brain worked quickly. Somebody in the house had found the means of giving orders to a jinnee—by rubbing a lamp, perhaps, or uncorking a bottle in which the jinnee was confined—and beyond question the evidence pointed to Marmaduke. That fellow who brought the stallion would take orders from no one but him, and the same thing applied to the man in charge of the camels. Mr. Pottinger's abduction was not quite so easy to connect with Marmaduke, except that no one else under his roof was capable of ordering such an unprincipled act.

He put Mr. Pottinger in the Blue Bedroom, and on the next morning he did not go to the City but retired to his study and sent for his elder son.

Marmaduke had promised his uncle not to tell anyone about the saucepan, but what chance has a small boy against a father who alternately coaxes and bullies him in the privacy of his study? Before long he blurted out the whole story and even promised to conceal his confession from Uncle Charlie and on no account to breathe a word about it to his grandmother.

Grandmamma was the one person of whom Mr. Pettywood stood in awe. If *she* came to hear about the saucepan the game would be up, for she was a lady of strong religious scruples and he made no doubt that she would draw the line at a heathen jinnee. Besides, she could claim the saucepan as her own property. However, provided he could keep the matter quiet, he should be able to make a good thing out of Zabba-shalook. He would ask him for £100,000 or so in gold and invest it in these new railway shares which were almost certain to rise in the next few years. So he dismissed Marmaduke with a benevolent pat on the head and in the course of the morning he strolled about the yard frowning as if deep in thought about some grave commercial transaction.

Uncle Charlie, however, had forestalled him. The sudden appearance of Mr. Pottinger who had been graciously offered a shakedown for the night and who came down to breakfast in tropical outfit looked like another supernatural event. There

was not a moment to be lost. He too wandered about the yard in an aimless way, occasionally peeping in through the kitchen window where Bridget and Mrs. Wilkins were engaged in what seemed an endless argument about the morals of a young woman.

At last they disappeared and he darted in. Seizing the oldest saucepan in the long row of pans on the shelf, he was about to make off with it when Mrs. Wilkins returned.

"Oh—I—ah—I want to make a bran mash for my horse," he explained awkwardly. The cook merely sniffed, and Uncle Charlie retreated to the coach-house where he clapped the saucepan on his head and banged it with the handle of the yard broom. It gave out a tinny sound but no jinnee appeared.

Suddenly he heard another sound, and turning quickly round, he was astonished to see Mrs. Pettywood half hidden behind one of the boxes.

"What *are* you doing, pray?" she inquired, speaking indistinctly because her mouth was full of Turkish delight.

Uncle Charlie could not think what to say, so mumbling something incoherent, he returned to the kitchen and replaced the pan on the shelf. Clearly it was the wrong one, but as Mrs. Wilkins was looking indignant he did not dare to experiment with another. The best he could do was to take cover in the harness room from where he had a view of the kitchen door.

It was not long before he observed Mr. Pettywood strolling up and down the yard. Had he bullied Marmaduke into breaking his promise?

Mrs. Wilkins also noticed her employer walking up and down outside and peeping in through the window as if he were spying on her. This annoyed her greatly, but it was nothing to her annoyance when she caught him creeping out of the door with one of her saucepans in his hand.

What had come over them all? she asked Burfoot indignantly. First Master Marmaduke had stolen one of her pans, then Mr. Charles, and now the Master himself. Did they all think they were Robinson Crusoe? The butler raised his smooth eyebrows and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Like most servants he was very inquisitive about the affairs of his master. He went to the hall and fetched an ancient receipt which had been pushed off the back of the hall table onto the floor, and placing it in the centre of the silver tray, he went out to look for Mr. Pettywood.

Meanwhile, Uncle Charlie, seeing his brother emerge furtively from the kitchen with the saucepan in his hand, followed him into the garden. Mr. Pettywood made for the summer-house where after closing the door he placed the saucepan on his head and struck it with a sovereign which was in his pocket. Nothing

happened, so he rapped it again, whereupon the door opened and Charlie came in.

"Hullo, George," he said. "Having a game of soldiers?"

His brother snatched the saucepan from his head with an oath.

"Now, now, no need to take offence. I don't want to spoil your fun."

"Go to the devil!" Mr. Pettywood exclaimed angrily.

"Look here," said Uncle Charlie, "it's no good banging that thing, you've got the wrong saucepan."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You're trying to summon old Thingummy, the jinnee."

"Well, suppose I am?" said Mr. Pettywood in an altered tone.

"Why, it's no good us two quarrelling about it. Let's go into partnership. Hang it all, George, don't be greedy."

"H'm," said George, realizing that he was cornered. "Well, how are we to get the confounded saucepan without arousing the suspicions of the servants?"

Now, when Charlie Pettywood entered the summer-house, Burfoot was not far behind him, carrying the receipt on the silver tray in a dignified manner. He stopped at the door to listen, and so interesting did he find the conversation that he did not like to interrupt it. So he stayed with his ear to the keyhole.

But presently Mr. Pottinger came into the garden with Miss Tibbett, so he could not very well stay to hear any more. He was obliged to return to the kitchen where he told the servants what he had overheard. Their amazement was boundless.

Burfoot was not a very imaginative man, but as he told his story he began to put the facts together, and all at once he realized that one of the pans on the shelf above his head must be the magic one whereby it was possible to summon a jinnee.

There was not a moment to be lost. Seizing the saucepan nearest to hand, he clapped it on his head and dealt it a resounding blow with a colander which lay on the table.

Nothing happened. He snatched it off, threw it on the floor and turned to take another one; but Mrs. Wilkins stepped in between. "I will have no nasty jinnees in *my* kitchen, if you please," she said tartly.

By this time Burfoot was thinking that he would ask the jinnee to provide him with a nice little public house in Richmond where he could spend the rest of his days in comfort. With a lack of manners surprising in a man so dignified, he pushed Mrs. Wilkins roughly aside. She picked up the rolling-pin, but he caught hold of her wrist and wrenched it from her, whereupon Martha screamed and the scullery maid shouted, "Murder!"

Hearing the hullabaloo, Grandmamma came into the kitchen, by which time the butler was trying his luck with another saucepan. "Pray what is the meaning of this?" asked Grandmamma sternly.

"If you please, M'm, I wish to give notice," said the cook.

"Nonsense!" snapped the old lady. "Burfoot, why have you a saucepan on your head? Have you taken leave of your senses?" Looking uncommonly foolish, he replaced the pan on the shelf. "Well?" said Grandmamma, "I'm waiting for your explanation."

Burfoot stammered that, having occasion to deliver an important letter to his master, he had found him in the summer-house, his head crowned with a saucepan, and had heard him say to Mr. Charles that one of the pans in the kitchen was a magical one, the wearer of which by striking it could summon a jinnee to perform his bidding.

In order to assist Mr. Pettywood, he had immediately returned to the kitchen to discover if possible which of the saucepans possessed these useful properties, but, unhappily, his devotion to duty had been misunderstood.

"Go and fetch your master at once," said Grandmamma sharply. "Mr. Charles also," she added as he went out.

The cross-examination which Mr. Pettywood and Uncle Charlie underwent in the drawing-room was not very pleasant for either of them. Realizing that it was no good trying to conceal anything from the old lady, they made a full confession; but Uncle Charlie did not give in without a struggle.

"I know the saucepan belongs to you, Mother," he said humbly, "but I think you might give us a chance. Why not allow each of us to have the loan of your saucepan for just one wish? I declare, I should only want *one*."

"I have no intention of providing you with a harem," replied Grandmamma acidly. "Now I wish to see Marmaduke."

Hearing that his grandmother wanted to see him, Marmaduke felt apprehensive. But when he saw her, she only asked him to come with her to the kitchen and identify the saucepan of Great-Uncle Tobias. And this proved easier than might have been expected, because on examining the pans in a good light one of them was found to be inscribed with Arabic lettering.

Grandmamma took it up to her room and locked the door. She removed her bonnet and, having carefully dusted the pan, put it on her head and rapped it with her thimble.

Up billowed the column of smoke from the carpet, revealing the swarthy figure of the jinnee. "Peace be upon thee, Sister of an Honoured Mother," he said, making an obeisance.

"Young man," said Grandmamma, almost blushing, "this costume is most unseemly." The jinnee said nothing.

"Am I to understand," she said, when she had recovered her composure, "that you will procure for me anything I ask of you?" The jinnee signified assent.

"Then I should like you to bring me a hardy plant which will thrive in this inclement atmosphere of London."

"Hearkening and obedience."

"Understand, I wish for a *respectable* plant."

"On my head and eyes be thy command."

The next morning an oriental lady came to the house. She wore voluminous trousers, turned-up slippers, and a brilliant sash; her finger-nails were stained with henna and a yashmak covered the lower half of her beautiful face. She carried a brass-bound tub in which was a plant with broad green leaves. Grandmamma hastened to take it from her because Uncle Charlie was stroking his moustache and staring hard at the lady. The plant looked thoroughly respectable and she called it Aspidistra after her favourite aunt.

In the afternoon she ordered the landau, and taking the pan with her she drove to the middle of Westminster Bridge where she told Fred to pull up. Here, almost for the first time in her life, she hesitated because a sudden idea had occurred to her. What if she sent the saucepan to the Bishop to assist him with his collection for the Diocesan Fund? It was a tempting idea, but she resisted it, for even bishops, she remembered, were men. She told Fred to throw it into the river, which he did.

And thus perished the magic saucepan of Zabba-shalook. Long ago, no doubt, it rusted away in the mud of the Thames. Uncle Charlie rode the stallion for several years, and sometimes Marmaduke was allowed to ride him, too. At length he was sold for a handsome sum at Tattersall's.

Much of the Turkish delight was also sold, though a good deal of it was eaten, chiefly by Uncle Charlie and Mamma.

Mr. Pottinger was at last persuaded that he was not dreaming and bashfully accepted in marriage by Miss Tibbett.

As to the aspidistra, it has become a most popular plant with all town dwellers of high moral principles and unquestioned respectability, and it looks like remaining so for a great many years to come.

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Armour is the kind of clothing worn by a man whose tailor was a blacksmith. AMBROSE BIERCE

CHRISTMAS IN THE SUN

There was the glint of a gun barrel as she rummaged in her reticule

by JOHN PUDNEY

"WE'VE reached an age when we feel we can forego the romantic trimmings of Christmas," said Aunt Molly.

"We both feel that," Aunt May said.

They were, you see, modern aunts. A pair of practical, bridge-playing, travelled aunts. They regarded themselves as jolly good fun. They were. They sat down and wrote cheques, that year, for everyone—rather handsome cheques in envelopes marked *not to be opened till Christmas Day*.

Aunt Molly said: "It will be a change for the family not to see us for once."

"It will be a change for us not to see the family," said Aunt May. "Though, of course, in Mother's time . . ."

Only death from natural causes had emancipated them from their long servitude to the sweet tyranny of that old lady. They had earned every moment of their freedom—even when it entailed driving across Europe in the depth of winter in search of Christmas in the sun.

The smallest Daimler they favoured, usually driven by Aunt May, with a running commentary from Aunt Molly, must have caused something of a stir upon the bleak European highways at that time of year.

The aunts liked to travel at speed but in the grand manner. They were prepared to pay, but not through the nose. They were not content with mere luggage. They took with them a kind of safari equipment of their own devising, which included cooking utensils, an ample medicine chest, sleeping-bags, snow-boots, mosquito nets, dictionaries, reference books, packs of cards, several of their favourite indoor games, a typewriter, golf-clubs, a quantity of tinned foods and a supply of their favourite brands of tea and biscuits.

"If you don't happen to like a place or if we think they're going to rook us," said Aunt Molly, "we can simply camp in the car and remain entirely self-supporting."

Aunt May not only echoed these brave words but took no chances about self-defence either. Just before their departure,

we noticed the glint of a gun-barrel as she was rummaging in her reticule—a detail the usually alert Customs people must have overlooked.

With the first Christmas cards that year came postcards from the aunts. They struck a patch of wintry sun in the South of France and had pressed on to meet December rain when they sent us an air mail from Southern Italy. After that it did not surprise us that communication ceased. We told each other that the two aunts and their Daimler must by now be crossing water—to the accompaniment of the usual wrangles about route and destination.

On the face of it, Aunt Molly always had everything her own way, but, in fact, Aunt May had inherited all the old lady's sweet ruthlessness and obstinacy. She would allow herself to be marshalled, even bullied, up to that unpredictable point where she would dig her toes in. Then nothing would shake her, and nothing, least of all Aunt Molly, would move her.

They did indeed have such a row in the December rain in Italy. It lasted all the way across the Ionian Sea. Aunt Molly had been determined to cross to Sicily. Aunt May, producing a pack of cards and beginning one of her games of patience, had said: "We've been to Sicily, Molly. We've never been to Greece. The man says there's always sun in Greece."

"What man?"

"Why, the man in the shipping-office."

"He just wanted our money."

"Everybody wants our money, Molly, if it comes to that. Don't you remember that place in Sicily where we were rooked?"

Aunt May played her patience, sitting in the back of the Daimler as it wobbled insecurely on the foredeck of the little steamer. Aunt Molly sulked and was sick.

It was because of her queasy stomach and her sulks that on the other side Aunt Molly made such a half-hearted effort with the maps and gave up back-seat driving altogether. "I'm simply giving you your head, May," she snapped as they moved vaguely in the direction of the Albanian border, sharing the conviction even in their divided minds that they were bound for the Gulf of Corinth and Athens.

"At least," said May later, as they bumped their way through unknown honey-curdled foothills, "we've sun, just as the man said."

"You have your own way, May, and we certainly have sun." Aunt Molly drew at her cigarette through her long holder. She had yet to make the confession that they were hopelessly lost. Instead, she pointed to the pedestrian they were about to over-

take, the first human being they had seen for many miles: " I think we might offer that fellow a lift. He seems pretty well loaded."

" But the fleas, Molly . . ."

" Really, May, in a wild country like this, what do you expect ? In any case, we have the spray in the boot of the car."

So, to the astonishment and delight of Leonidas, the Daimler stopped beside him on his arduous road to the mountain, arriving indeed at a moment when he had been praying to God for anything on four legs that might ease his burden.

" You very swell dames," said he, hazily recollecting the talk of G.I.'s. during the war, hazily realizing that the spate of Latin, Italian, and ancient Greek that had come from Aunt Molly meant that he was to be given a lift.

He humbled himself obsequiously before the massive figure of Aunt Molly emerging from the front seat and stood by, mystified, while the two ladies had a brief but spectacular row. The aunts were much too well travelled to admit to the back seat any stranger who might club them as they sat in front. Aunt May, however, refused to continue to drive with a passenger beside her who might well be crawling with fleas.

So Aunt Molly was argued into the driving seat, Leonidas was placed beside her, and Aunt May, fingering the gun in her reticule, took up a strategic position in the back, an arrangement accompanied by silken volleys of vituperation while Leonidas grinned, muttering, " Very swell dames," as he offered up prayers of thanks for his own good fortune.

His eye took in the safari equipment, the rings on their fingers, the cigarettes that casually emerged from expensive cases. " I go home," he said and mentioned a place-name which only he could pronounce, and for which Aunt May searched in vain upon the map.

" Where you swell dames going ? "

They told him in their outlandish lingo that they were going to Athens. They explained that they were spending Christmas in the sun. Leonidas, shaking his mane, laughed often. He did not scratch. He brought out a flask of liquor from his bosom and offered it to these incredible women sent by God. Even though they refused it, he grinned and charmed them, offering up prayers that this journey should bring him in triumph along the track which would lead him home, home to the brotherhood of Nicholas, Stavros, and the great Panayotis, whose burden he carried.

" You stop with my people," he said, when they came to the crossroads.

" We stop in a hotel," said Aunt Molly, elaborating the statement in various languages.

Leonidas shook his head. " Hotel, nix. No son-of-a-bitch in this place. My big brother Panayotis, he talk very good. He see you all right."

Leonidas was one who took no chances, either. A mile or so along the track where the Daimler was well out of sight of the road, he persuaded Aunt Molly, without much difficulty, to stop. He did this by means of gestures. They were charming gestures. It was only when he got out of the car and fired a pistol shot that the aunts had any doubts.

" I make my big brother come along," he explained to them, " Panayotis, he talk very good."

" I think we'll be wise to stay where we are, May."

" I think that may be wise, Molly," said Aunt May, unaware that Leonidas, just after he had flashed her a smile with his beautiful white teeth, had stooped to jab his knife into the tyre immediately beneath her.

The whistle of escaping air and the tilt of the car might have panicked some people. Aunt Molly merely said: " I think we've a flat."

" I'm sure of it," Aunt May replied. " We'll simply have to get this fellow here to change the wheel."

" He's armed. I think he's behaving rather oddly, May."

" You seem to overlook the fact that I also am armed."

There was no chance whatever of anyone overlooking that fact. The moment Nicholas, Stavros, and Panayotis appeared, Aunt May, muttering briefly something about their having fallen among thieves, took aim and fired. If the head of the notorious bandit Panayotis had been greater and his hair less, she might well have killed him on the spot. As it was, she succeeded in boring a hole through his much-prized black hat and in cutting an ugly furrow through the lustrous curls on his scalp.

The brothers of Leonidas, well skilled in such direct approaches, closed in then with the grace of ballet dancers, the finesse of born guerrillas, and captured the two aunts.

" These very swell dames," crowed Leonidas.

" Shut up, you," exclaimed Panayotis, in his superior English. Then, glaring at the aunts, he added with regal pride—for he was no less a king in all that range of mountains—" You tried to kill me, eh ? Many clever people have tried that and, like many other very clever people, you shall die."

Regally, he turned on his heel and led the way up the track. A dozen bandits, responding to his whistle, reinforced the

brethren and none too gently hustled the aunts forward in his footsteps.

" We've certainly got sun, May. But what a way to spend Christmas Eve! It just shows what happens when I let you have your head."

With sweet and ruthless vehemence, the argument was continued in the cave where they were thrust to await the pleasure of Panayotis. Aunt Molly pointed out that such things had never happened to them in Sicily. Aunt May retorted that it would not have happened now if the maps had been properly read and if she had not been persuaded, in spite of fleas, to pick up Leonidas.

Standing where the winter sun shone bleakly through the bars at the entrance to the cave, they observed a cavalcade of bandits bearing their luggage and safari equipment.

" Look how we're being robbed and rifled," exclaimed Aunt Molly.

" Not that worldly possessions matter much now that we're condemned to death," Aunt May snapped back.

" But, my dear May, the fellow was merely indulging in a figure of speech. They never actually kill people nowadays. We shall probably be held to ransom."

" And spend weeks and weeks in this place? Think of the sanitation, Molly. Think of the fleas. I'd almost prefer death with honour. But, at any rate, I hope they don't take too long making up their minds."

A sigh that was nearly a sob was apparent in Aunt Molly's voice. " Think of it! Christmas Day tomorrow . . . and they'll all be opening those cheques we left . . . all thinking about us."

" If I were you, Molly, I should take your mind off morbid thoughts. In any case, we decided to eschew the conventional romance of Christmas . . ."

" What is this," snivelled Aunt Molly, " if it isn't romance? Bandits! A death cell! That this should have happened to us! If only you hadn't fired that shot . . ." Aunt Molly wept.

" I fired it in self-defence, which, in the circumstances, I was quite entitled to do. For heaven's sake, compose yourself, my dear. I'll see if they'll let us have a pack of cards. They'll hardly deny us that."

By standing at the bars and shrilling across the lemon-coloured mountainside, May attracted an audience of curious bandits. In the mixture of European languages and gestures that seemed to her appropriate to the country, she spoke to them with such

force that they sent for the bearded Stavros, right-hand man of Panayotis himself, and master of a Mediterranean seafarer's English.

Panayotis, he explained, was a ruthless but just man. The loot was being stored in his quarters to be checked over. In due course, the brethren would receive their shares. Probably there would be enough for every member of the band to receive some trifle, some souvenir, as it were, to remember the savage English ladies. Had the great Panayotis not been attacked in that murderous manner, he might indeed have thought fit to enter into ransom negotiations.

But those who attempted to murder the great Panayotis, be they man, woman, or child, could only expect the extreme penalty which, by the way, would be swift and painless, for the Chief was a civilized man who did not believe in torture except where there was some practical need for it. A further proof of his humanity was the order he had given that the ladies were not to be searched or in any other way molested—Stavros glanced at their rings as he said this.

" But you'll get all we've got when you're . . . after you've . . ." quavered Aunt Molly.

" After you've done us in," Aunt May said.

" That's what the Chief said," Stavros shrugged. " Meanwhile he wishes you to be comfortable."

" Tell him we shall be less uncomfortable if we have the spray from the boot of the car and a pack of cards, the ones from my reticule will do . . ."

The spray and the playing cards were brought with some ceremony, accompanied by wine and goat-milk cheese. Stavros said: " The Chief pay compliments to the good sense of you dames."

They settled down then in a disinfected corner near the grille where the golden light of the late afternoon came pouring in. The wine tasted like stain-remover and the cheese like paraffin wax but the game of two-handed whist was an absorbent for all passions. Aunt Molly forgot her tears. Aunt May gave herself up to sweet aggression.

They lost all sense of time and place and Stavros, when he returned at the setting of the sun, had to clear his throat several times before he could distract them.

" Do you play the game called bridge ? " he inquired.

" Why, of course," said Aunt Molly, her assurance now returned.

" Excuse, please, the interruption," Stavros said. " I learnt to make the bridge game at sea."

The aunts shrugged their shoulders. Unintentionally, perhaps, they made Stavros feel that he was irrelevant.

When he came back later, they were still at grips with each other. Though in the dying light it looked as though Stavros had brought along an execution squad with him, the aunts were too preoccupied to quail. They could only just see the cards. "*It's neck or nothing before the light fails,*" Aunt Molly said.

"It's neck or nothing anyway," said Aunt May.

"Excuse, please. The Chief says he doesn't want to kill you just now," said Stavros. "He needs a four for his bridge game. Him and me .... we both need it. Him and me has nobody to play bridge this last year or two. Men all too stupid. The prisoners all too frightened. You swell dames play bridge with the Chief, eh?"

"So long as he has some light to play by," Aunt Molly said.

"We certainly can't go on playing whist in the dark," said Aunt May.

Stavros clapped his hands with joy. "You mean you will play with us?"

"Contract or auction?" said Aunt Molly.

"For reasonable stakes, of course," said Aunt May.

The great Panayotis, amid the rich hangings of the cave which was his home and fortress, clapped his hands, summoning lights, refreshments, and the two brand-new packs of cards looted from the limousine.

"It is long time since I had the game of bridge," he declared. "Even by means of kidnap, I can't obtain players to make a four. Since that silly Leonidas shot the Chief of Police for the district, we haven't even had three." His gesture of welcome was royal. "We play now for stakes, or just as I've heard people say 'for love?'"

"Certainly not for love!" said Aunt Molly.

"We prefer small stakes ourselves," Aunt May said. "If I had my reticule . . . But there, let me put forward this, as earnest of my good intentions." She unpinned the pinchbeck brooch which held her scarf. "You may be a bandit, but I trust you'll honour yours."

"I am," said the great Panayotis, "a man of honour."

"A man of justice, too," said Stavros.

"No fool at the bridge-playing, either," Panayotis added.

"We're neither of us, I hope, fools at bridge," said Aunt Molly.

"Neither of us," Aunt May said, glaring first at the Chief and then at his Lieutenant.

All this was hardly an exaggeration on anybody's part, though the bandits clearly suffered some disabilities in their lack of practice. The game of two-handed whist in the cave had been absorbing. This, as rubber succeeded rubber, was first stimulating, then exultant.

Outside, beneath the silver December sky, the bandits moved restlessly, awaiting the division of the loot, the execution of the captives, or the dispatch of ransom offers. Inside the cave, the atmosphere grew dense with the tobacco smoke, not only of the men but also of the aunts who quickly won back their cigarette supply, their long holders, and even the expensive cases from which they were accustomed to take their cigarettes.

The great Panayotis and the bearded Stavros sweated visibly and grunted often, during this night of nights in which they endured and exulted in a marathon game that made up for the lost years.

Aunt Molly was the tactician, Aunt May the strategist. They staked their rings and brooches, their passports and travellers' cheques. They won back first their baggage, then their safari equipment. When they had plenty in hand, they would step up the gamble by offering their rings all over again.

It was in the small hours that Aunt Molly judiciously sent out a skin of wine she had won for the pleasure of the bandits assembled round the mouth of the cave. To the accompaniment of song and laughter, half an hour later, Aunt May, the strategist, staked their lives and won.

"I'm a man of honour. You are swell dames," declared the great Panayotis.

"With such a sense of honour and a little more practice at the game itself," Aunt Molly declared, "you would pass anywhere. Now, the Daimler . . . "

"The Daimler?"

"Our motor car."

"Why, of course!" Panayotis made a princely gesture.

Aunt Molly would have risen from the table with the first pink light of that Christmas morning, the Daimler, their lives, and all their possessions in hand, had she not received a discreet hack on the shin from Aunt May.

"If the Chief is not too fatigued," Aunt May said, "there's a little matter of the changing of the wheel. Your brother Leonidas, he would be the one to change it . . ."

The brightness of angels was in that Greek sky when they emerged from the cave for their Christmas in the sun. Panayotis, that man of honour, saw to it that the wheel was changed by

Leonidas. It was the task of Stavros to see that the luggage and safari equipment were restored just as they had been left.

The aunts were in good spirits and, to the mystification of that Greek Orthodox company, wished everybody a happy Christmas. In her last fling, Aunt Molly had possessed herself of the prize of all the Panayotis hangings. Aunt May contented herself with the Panayotis silver-handled pistol.

That rug of exquisite craftmanship is still displayed at the bridge parties regularly given by the aunts, during the long English winters. The silver-handled pistol, alas, parted company with Aunt May at the counter of the British Customs, in spite of her protest that it was a mere antique presented to her by some foreigner at Christmas. Not suspecting that such a sweetly aggressive aunt should possess a less ornate weapon in her reticule, Her Majesty's Customs did not deprive her of that means of self-defence.

"I can't say we exactly escaped romance," Aunt Molly explained to us.

"At least we did have our Christmas in the sun," Aunt May said.

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS to FESTIVE BOARD on page 48.

1. *Christmas with Sir Roger de Coverley, from "The Spectator," by Joseph Addison.*
2. *The meal shared by the knight-at-arms and the faery's child, in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," by John Keats.*
3. *The Cratchits' Christmas dinner in "A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens.*
4. *The wedding feast of the Frog and Lady Mouse in the nursery rhyme, "The Marriage of the Frog and the Mouse."*
5. *The feast of roast pig in "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig," from "The Essays of Elia," by Charles Lamb.*
6. *The feast ordered by the poet in "Ad Ministram," by William Makepeace Thackeray.*
7. *The Christmas feast of the Boar's Head at Queen's College, Oxford, in "The Boar's Head Carol," author unknown.*
8. *Bottom's "peck of provender" in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," by William Shakespeare.*
9. *Jael's offering to Sisera before she nailed his head to the ground, in the Old Testament Book of Judges.*

TROUBLE BY NIGHT

What hath night to do with sleep?

JOHN MILTON, *Comus*

To bedward be you merry, or have merry company about you, so that to bedward no anger nor heaviness, sorrow nor pensivefulness, do trouble nor disquiet you . . .

DR. ANDREW BOORDE, *A Compendyous Regiment*, 1542

Dark Thoughts

Oft in the stilly night,
When the mind is fumbling fuzzily,
I brood about how little I know,
And know that little so muzzily.
Ere slumber's chains have bound me
I think it would suit me nicely
If I knew one tenth of the little I know
But knew that tenth precisely.

O Delius, Sibelius,
And what's his name Aurelius,
O Manet, O Monet,
Mrs. Siddons and the Cid!
I know each name
Has an oriflamme of fame,
I'm sure they all did something
But I can't think what they did . . .

OGDEN NASH, *Versus*

Bumps in the Night

Aunt Gracie Shoaf . . . was confident that burglars had been getting into her house every night for forty years. The fact that she never missed anything was to her no proof to the contrary. She always claimed that she scared them off before they could take anything, by throwing shoes down the hallway. When she went to bed, she piled, where she could get at them handily, all the shoes there were about her house.

Five minutes after she had turned off the light, she would sit up in bed and say " Hark ! " Her husband, who had learned to ignore the whole situation as long ago as 1903, would either be sound asleep or pretend to be sound asleep. In either case

he would not respond to her tugging and pulling, so that presently she would arise, tiptoe to the door, open it slightly, and heave a shoe down the hall in one direction, and its mate down the hall in the other direction. Some nights, she threw them all, some nights only a couple of pair.

JAMES THURBER, *My Life and Hard Times*

Unwanted Serenade

That was I, you heard last night,
When there rose no moon at all,
Nor, to pierce the strained and tight
Tent of heaven, a planet small:
Life was dead, and so was light.

Not a twinkle from the fly,
Not a glimmer from the worm.
When the crickets stopped their cry,
When the owls forbore a term,
You heard music; that was I.

Earth turned in her sleep with pain,
Sultrily suspired for proof;
In at heaven and out again,
Lightning!—where it broke the roof,
Bloodlike, some few drops of rain.

Oh, how dark your villa was,
Windows fast and obdurate!
How the garden grudged me grass
Where I stood—the iron gate,
Ground its teeth to let me pass!

ROBERT BROWNING, 1812–89,
A Serenade at the Villa

Golden Slumbers

Saterday nigt I dremed that I was deade, and afterward my bowels were taken out, and I walked and talked with diverse, and among other with the Lord Thresorer who was com to my howes to burn my bokes when I was dead, and thought he looked sourely on me.

JOHN DEE, *Diary*, 1582

Under Cover

A lady was awoke in the night with a disagreeable sense of not being alone in the room, and soon felt a thud upon her bed. There was no doubt that someone was moving to and fro in the room, and that hands were constantly moving over her bed.

She was so dreadfully frightened that at last she fainted. When she came to herself, it was broad daylight, and she found that the butler had walked in his sleep and had laid the table for fourteen upon her bed.

AUGUSTUS HARE, *The Story of My Life*, 1880

Necessity

Late last night I slew my wife,
Stretched her on the parquet flooring,
I was loath to take her life,
But I had *to stop her snoring !*

HARRY GRAHAM

Careless Talk

Then Sir Lancelot had a condition that he used of custom, he would clatter in his sleep, and speak oft of his lady, Queen Guenever. And in his sleep he talked and clattered as a jay, of the love that had been betwixt Guenever and him.

And so as he talked so loud, the queen heard him there as she lay in her chamber; and when she heard him so clatter she was nigh out of her mind, and for anger and pain wist not what to do. And then she coughed so loud that Sir Lancelot awaked . . . and therewith he leapt out of his bed, in his shirt, and the queen met him in the floor and thus she said . . .

" Look thou never abide in my court, thou false traitor knight that thou art."

" Alas," said Sir Lancelot and fell down to the floor in a swoon. And therewithal Queen Guenever departed. And when Sir Lancelot awoke of his swoon, he leapt out at a bay window into a garden, and so he ran two year and never man might have grace to know him.

SIR THOMAS MALORY

Man Overboard !

Blessed are the sleepy, for they shall soon drop off...

FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE

WRONG SIDE OF THE RIVER

Murder sets a man apart from his fellows

By BRETT HALLIDAY

I RECOGNIZED him as soon as I saw him sitting there at a rear table in the Juarez bar-room. He was not only alone at the small table, but he also gave the impression that he was alone in the crowded room.

I don't know exactly why. Something about the way he sat there drinking *sotol* out of a thick tumbler, remote and withdrawn; the arrogant set of his wide shoulders that disdained the shabby clothes he wore; the cheapness of the fire-water he was drinking. It was in the cold, measuring quality of the blue eyes beneath shaggy brows. They seemed to look through a man, past the confines of the room.

That's what I remember about him now, as I look back on the scene, but at the moment I wasn't very objective about his appearance. All I could think of was that he was alone. I remember thinking that it was destined to be like that with him always, that he had chosen a lonely path for himself so long as he lived.

Murder does set a man apart from his fellow man.

I recognized him from his picture in the paper. He had strangled a girl named Lola in El Paso the night before, and the American police had a good description of him and were searching for him through the dark alleys of El Paso while he sat alone across the border, guzzling *sotol* in a Mexican dive.

That was back when extradition was more an empty word than a reality, and a man could leave a lot of fears behind him when he crossed the Rio Grande. But there was some law in Juarez even in those days, and you never could tell when a Mexican cop might discover his conscience, or a couple of U.S. detectives might slip over in plain clothes and yank him back without due process of law.

Not that the killing had been important enough to arouse a lot of public indignation. Lola wasn't the sort to get people excited about her murder. Just a girl from one of the dim side streets near the river.

She'd been living with this guy for months, supporting him

with money she earned from other men, and I suppose she finally got tired of it. But she made the mistake of telling him she was through while they were alone, and there was no one to stop him. So he strangled her and took a few dollars from the top of her stocking and beat it across the river before her body was found.

There were pictures of the dead girl in the paper, too. I'd known Lola for a long time, back when she hadn't looked like that, and I'd been nagged all day by memories of her as she'd been then.

But that's something just between Lola and me. Hell, I could remember the time when I was sore enough to kill her myself. Years back, when she first started down towards where she ended. I made a fool of myself that time. Lola had a nasty way of rubbing a man the wrong way.

That's why I felt like I did about her killer sitting there in the saloon with a shoulder-holstered gun bulging his coat, probably without getaway money, and wondering how long Juarez would remain safe for him.

Remembering Lola, I knew I had to get him out of Juarez. The country south of the border is tough without money or a job. I couldn't just step up and offer him either. Not without overplaying my hand and maybe telling him what I knew about Lola and why I was making the offer.

Our train was pulling out at midnight. Just a couple of hours later. I had a feeling I'd regret it all my life if I left him sitting there like that, knowing what I did about the whole set-up.

Another thing I knew about the guy was the fact that he had once been a construction man. A good one, from all reports. A high-top rigger with all the savvy and nerve that job calls for. But you can't handle sky cables and a load of liquor at the same time, so he'd given up the cables.

It gave me a queer feeling to see him sitting there twiddling a tumbler of *sotol* in his big, scarred hands, with a gun bulging his coat, while he waited for whatever was going to happen. Hands that were muscled and calloused from cable work, and that had choked the life out of Lola last night

I suppose that had something to do with my feeling about him. Construction men have a personal pride in themselves and the men they work with. Maybe it sounds trite, but the real building chap is like that, underneath the hard-boiled pose he shows to the world. It's a tough, dangerous profession, and a man doesn't stay in it long unless he has the absolute trust of his co-workers.

Take my gang—the three men drinking at the bar with me that night in Juarez : Larry Wheeler, Benny Arentz, and Walter Drake. We'd been together four years, and there had hardly been a day on any job that one of us hadn't trusted his life to one of the others. Of course, we were a special sort of gang. I guess you'd call us trouble-shooters. Each one of us a specialist in his own line, and together we made a team that could whip any job flung at us.

Sure, that's bragging, but we had a record to brag about. Larry Wheeler was past fifty, stringy as whipcord, bald and sarcastic. He knew more about concrete than any other man alive. He knew rock- and water-analysis, and tricks with reinforcing steel that let the rest of us forget all about waiting for the stuff to take an initial set.

My rigger was Benny Arentz. He had the shoulders of a Percheron on top of a short, grotesquely thin body. He had long arms, with the shoulder muscles flowing down into them, and big hands that could reave a six-place block on the end of a steel cable while he hung by his knees from a strut three hundred feet above the ground and whipping thirty degrees each way in a tropical wind.

Benny had come up from the oil-fields, and the only thing wrong with him was women. He was ugly enough to have to keep on proving to us and the world that he was irresistible to the ladies. On the job he was all right, but on a city street he was as hard to hold back as a stud horse.

Walter Drake was our powder man. He was a graduate of the Copper Queen in Bisbee, had worked all over the world, and had once lifted fifteen thousand tons of rock off one side of the Khyber Pass and deposited it where they wanted it down the slope. He knew all about rock formation and fissures and faults and bearing strata, and what three and a half sticks of forty per cent would do in a drill hole.

Me ? I was just the boss. I got an engineering degree some place, but I managed to forget I had it twenty years ago. With Larry and Walter and Benny doing the work there wasn't much bossing to be done. Every once in a while I got an idea, and generally it worked. More luck than anything else, and I always knew that some day I would run into one that was too tough even for me. Like the one we were headed south to look at when we stopped off in the Juarez saloon.

A rush job that had brought us up in a hurry from one of the Keys of Florida where we were fooling with a little problem of setting up hurricane-proof oil-drilling rigs. It was back in the days before the Elephant Butte dam above El Paso pulled all

the floodwater out of the Rio Grande, and in the spring the boundary river had a way of swelling to an unmanageable torrent through the canyon below the Big Bend.

There was an International Highway cutting across from Burnsville to Alixican that both Mexico and the United States had been pushing towards the river from either direction, and everything was set for big doings with speeches by both Presidents and stuff like that, when the two countries were joined by the highway in just a month. I guess they'd even bought the blue ribbon that was to be tied across the hand-rails at the exact centre of the bridge, and the scissors it was to be cut with.

No one knew when the spring floods would come, but when they did, it was a cinch there wouldn't be much bridge-building across that river until the water subsided. No one had thought about that, apparently, until just a few days previously, when the water started rising.

Our job was to throw the bridge across before the floods got too high. Maybe in a day. Maybe a week. Or maybe not for a month. It was just chance that we stopped at Juarez between trains—a freak of fate that put us in the saloon for a few drinks that night with Lola's murderer.

Trouble was, Benny was having more than a few drinks. Usually I don't care how much one of my crew puts away, and it wouldn't be smart to say anything about it if I did. But Benny worried me. He'd been away from women a long time and he was beginning to get a desperate look about him. If he went off the track he might stay off two or three days. I'd picked a saloon for our drinking that didn't cater to women, and I was hoping for the best.

Then it happened.

I saw her push back the swing doors and walk in. Part Indian, from the tall grace and the free-swinging stride of her. Young and supple and rounded enough to set a man's blood racing, yet old enough to assure him he wouldn't be wasting his time making a play for her. I turned my head and saw Benny looking at her, and his nostrils flared and the glow flamed in his eyes and he set his glass down on the bar slowly.

I put my hand on his forearm and said, "Hold everything, Benny. We're catching a train in just two hours."

I guess he didn't hear me. He didn't give any indication that he did. He was staring past my shoulder towards the girl, and from the look on his face I knew she was giving him the eye. God knows why. There were lots of other men there. But Benny had a way of telegraphing something to a woman like that.

Walter Drake stood on the other side of Benny, their shoulders touching. He was turned away, saying something to Larry. He must have felt Benny's muscles tense, because he broke off what he was saying and turned to look at the girl.

She took a few steps towards us and Walter switched his gaze to Benny's face. I tightened my fingers on Benny's arm. But Benny pushed away from us towards the girl. Walter shrugged and looked at a clock on the wall. " Still two hours before the train leaves. Maybe . . . "

" Nuts," I said. " You know if Benny goes out that door we won't see him until tomorrow."

Benny and the girl already had their heads together and he was whispering to her. She nodded. Benny turned towards me with a grin.

" I'm going out for a few minutes."

I said, " No, you're not."

He said, " The hell I'm not ! "

I said, " We've got a job to do. We're catching that midnight train."

" Sure." He tried to be placating. " I'll be back like I said."

People at the bar were watching us, grinning. I saw the killer turn in his chair to listen.

" Nothing doing, Benny," I said. " If you walk out that door you needn't come back."

The grin went off Benny's face. He said, " If that's the way you want it."

" No, boss." It was Walter Drake. He grabbed my shoulder and spun me round. " You can't let the best rigger in the business go like that. Maybe Benny could even follow us down tomorrow . . "

I said, " Benny'll never rig another hoist for me if he goes out that door." I turned back to the bar and picked up my drink. My hand was shaking. I heard Benny and the girl walking out of the place together.

Walter and Larry both jumped on me. I told them I couldn't help it. If a dame meant more to Benny than sticking on the job, that was all right with me. We were all pretty sore and saying things we didn't mean when a new voice butted in behind us.

It was the guy who had been sitting alone at the table. Lola's murderer. He said, " If you can use a high-top rigger where you're going, I'm it."

We stopped arguing and looked at him. Walter and Larry looked at his cable-scarred hands first. Then at his face. Then at the gun bulge under his coat. He was a little drunk. Just enough to sway on both feet as he stood there.

I said, " How do I know you're a rigger ? "

The man had loose lips. They pulled away from yellow teeth in a smile, and he looked worse than when I'd first recognized him at the table.

" I can cut it, all right. Been at that work for ten years. Top rigger on that big Rio job six years ago. My name is Smith." He held out his hand.

I took it.

Walter Drake said roughly, " You were in Rio on another job six years ago, boss. If this mug was top rigger then, you should've run into him."

" I think maybe I did," I said slowly. " Doesn't seem like your name was Smith, though."

" It's Smith now. What's this job all about ? "

He pushed up to the bar with us and I gave it to him. I saw Walter looking at me speculatively, and later when the four of us were on the train together heading south, he sat beside me and said : " I think I got it, boss. You knew Smith was a rigger when you told Benny off. Recognized him from Rio. That's why you took a chance firing Benny. Smith looked like he'd jump at a job."

I said, " Benny needed telling off."

Walter nodded. I was still the boss and it wasn't up to him to tell me how to run my crew. He said, " It's taking a chance, though. Might be some fancy rigging waiting for us this time."

I didn't tell him how big a chance we were taking. The guy was a murderer and I was helping him make a getaway from Juarez where the police might have picked him up any time.

I couldn't tell Walter and Larry that. I couldn't tell them about Lola and what had once been between us that caused me to give her killer a chance to escape from Juarez. Me, who always hated a killer.

The job didn't look too tough when we reached the bridge site by truck about noon the next day. The Mexican side of the highway was subgraded all the way up to the jump-off, and there were some tents set up and a temporary field office. The graders and rollers were working half a mile back, with the surfacing team close behind them.

The spot chosen to jump the Rio Grande was a wide depression in the cliffs that form the river canyon, and you could see it was flooded every year when the water got up. There was an eighteen-foot fill on the south side, and a corresponding fill about eighty feet across on American soil. The sheer cliffs were

limestone, and muddy water was rolling and leaping not more than twenty feet below the edge.

Two cables were strung across with buckets on pulleys and a steam winch on either side to drag men and supplies across. The resident engineer for the American end was waiting for us when we piled out of the truck. He was a mild-looking guy of about thirty, with tired eyes and lines of worry on his face. He introduced himself as Harry Blaine, and I liked him right off.

I felt sorry for him when he explained that he was from the East and no one had bothered to warn him about the way the river flooded every spring and that was why he'd left the bridge work till the last. On the face of it, it was a simple enough span, but the river was already rising and no one could guess how soon the water would be licking at the top edges of the cliff, chewing away any abutments that men tried to put up.

The Mexican engineer was waiting for us outside the field office and took us in to look over the blueprints. He was slim and good-looking, with a little moustache and a lot of cocksureness. His attitude was one of polite regret about the whole matter, and a disposition to wash his hands of it. He blandly hinted that it was up to us and to fate, and that he planned to stand back on the side-lines.

The bridge design was orthodox. There was a single-arch span anchored in concrete abutments at each end. The steel was prefabricated and already on the site.

I took the blueprints and went out to see what we could figure out. There was a hot Mexican sun beating down, and the silence of the border country broken only by the faraway sounds of road construction. My three men were grouped at the foot of the fill on the bank of the river. I went down towards them and saw that grouped wasn't exactly the right word.

Walter Drake and Larry Wheeler were squatting down examining the limestone formation of the river-bank. Smith stood alone, about two feet away in actual distance—with us, but not one of us. His hands hung loosely at his sides and his head was lifted and he stared across at the other side. At American soil. Separated from it by eighty feet of muddy water.

I took time off from the problem confronting me to wonder what was in his mind as he looked across the river. He stood solid and immobile, and I couldn't see his face. This was the course he had chosen when he choked the life out of Lola. The wrong side of the river. He could never go back again.

I wondered if that bothered him. I've always felt the Man-Without-A-Country deal was a lot of nonsense. I've spent most of my life out of the States and never worried about getting

back. But as I saw Smith standing there, I realized that I could always go back. Maybe it was different, I thought, if you knew you *couldn't* go back.

I stopped behind Walter and Larry and asked, " How does it look ? "

Neither of them looked up. Larry said, " Not bad. Give me four days to get my forms set and I'll start pouring concrete. I don't care what the river does after my abutments and wing walls get their initial set."

I looked down at the water and then at my blueprints. The profile showed the opposite cliff to be five feet higher than where we stood. I said, " Have we got that long ? "

" *Quien sabe ?* " Larry spread out his hands and was cheerful about it. " Any other ideas ? "

Walter was still studying the rock and the water beneath him. " One of the guys on the truck says he's seen her rise twelve feet in twenty-four hours."

I squatted down beside them. Smith stood in front of us looking across the river. Larry took the blueprints out of my hand and studied them. " Eight days," he said after a moment, " and they can start on the trusswork."

I shook my head. " That's why we're here. To beat the river if she takes a notion to come up fast."

" Eight days," Larry repeated stubbornly. " You've got some bad stresses here. My anchor plates won't hold—"

" I've got a better idea," Drake broke in. He pointed down the side of the cliff. " I'll give you a set of steel braces about twelve feet down. We'll build up from them, grouting into the cliff every two feet. If we've got the steel around to do it with, you can forget your anchor plates and just throw up wing walls to protect the fill."

Both of us looked at him and began shaking our heads. Smith acted as if none of this meant anything to him.

" Here's what I mean." Walter grabbed a pencil and began sketching his idea on the print. " Build up braces from twelve feet down—that's all the bearing we need." He paused to study the steel diagram. " Here's stuff we can steal from the truss. These two I-beams are only extra weight. We burn them off in six-foot lengths— "

" Wait a minute," protested Larry. " How are you going to get into the rocks for anchorage, and how do you know— ? "

" Let me worry about that." Walter was in his stride now. " They've got powder here, and drills. Drop me some scaffolding twelve feet down and give me four hours before the water hits that point. I can stay ahead of it after that."

I said, " You might make it in time. The other side has five feet of elevation, so if we shoot this side first . . . " I stood up, staring across the river. " Let's jump in the bucket and ride across. If it'll work the same on that side, we'll get started."

The three of us went towards the bucket. I turned back and said, " Come on, Smith. We've got to decide this thing fast." Larry and Walter stopped and looked back at us.

Smith turned slowly from the river. " You three go ahead. I'll start rigging a boom for Drake's scaffolding."

" You'll have to check the other side, too, and get your boom layout started there," I told him impatiently. " No use jumping in on one side unless it's workable from the other."

He shook his head. There was still that remote quietude about him. " I'll save time by booming the whole job from this side."

Larry said, " You're crazy." He looked across the river. " It's at least eighty feet across."

Smith nodded calmly. " I've been figuring my end while you guys were arguing. We passed a five-yard drag-line in that last cut. I'll get it here and anchor it to use the boom."

" It's only a fifty-foot boom ! " Walter ejaculated.

" Don't you think I know what I'm saying ? " Hot anger flared in Smith's eyes and he took a step forward. I was conscious of that gun under his coat. He stopped and went on flatly, " I'm doing the rigging on this job. One of those pines on the hill behind us will extend the boom to handle the other side from here. Don't try to tell me my job."

Walter and Larry looked at me. I said, " Smith's right. It'll be faster if he can handle the whole thing from this side."

Walter looked down at the swift water. He said in a queer voice, " I like to know my rigger when I work above fast water. If a man went into that, his body wouldn't be recovered until it was washed up somewhere beyond the other end of the canyon."

A muscle jerked in Smith's face. He said, " If you're afraid of fast water, you'd better let somebody else do your job." He turned and strode up the fill towards a truck to drive back for the drag-line.

The three of us got into the cable bucket and started across to inspect the American side.

Walter Drake said, " I guess you know he's packing a gun under his coat."

" I know a gun bulge when I see it," I told him.

Larry said quietly, " I've got myself a hunch he feels happier on the south side of the river where the American law can't touch

him. That's why he wants to boom the whole thing from the Mexican side."

"Larry's right," Walter said. "Smith's on the dodge. Hell of a guy for the controls of a boom," he added morosely, looking down at the swirling, deadly water beneath our bucket.

"He's our rigger for this job," I reminded them. "No matter what he's done, he's still a construction man. When the chips are down, you can't get the job out of a man's blood. This is tough enough to take any man's mind off his own trouble."

I had to count on that, and I had to make them count on it. No matter what they thought about Smith personally. Time and the flood-waters were catching up with us and the job called for teamwork above everything else.

And we got that teamwork. No matter how we felt about Smith, he was a top-hand rigger, and nothing else counted during the next forty-eight hours.

A rush job gets hold of you like nothing else in the world. The throbbing pulse of men and machinery against the elements grips a man and puts everything else in the background. You don't sleep and you don't eat and you don't notice the lack of either. It's you against the job, and that's all there is in the whole blasted world.

When dark came on, we set up searchlights on both sides of the rising river, and time ceased to exist. The flood-waters crept upwards on the sides of the rock cliffs, snarling and angry at being thwarted by human beings. Smith anchored his big drag-line back from the edge and lashed a sixty-foot pine trunk to the spidery boom. He used the materials at hand and none of us tested the job. The rigging was up to him and we had our own work to do.

He slung his blocks from the end and threaded them, and geared his winch for the extra load, and he had Walter's scaffolds steady against the cliff five feet above the rising water by midnight.

Walter drilled his holes and shot them while I made up his steel the way he wanted it, and before daylight he had the first braces grouted in and was ready for the next set up the cliff.

The water kept rising, but we kept ahead of it. Larry was throwing his forms together out of anything he could get his hands on, and he had a mixer going on both sides by noon of that first day.

Walter Drake rode a hook over the chasm the first time Smith tried out his improvised boom. I saw Walter swinging across on the end of a cable and I remember only a feeling of pleased surprise at knowing he was ahead of the water on our side and

ready to tackle the first set across the river. Smith was in it with us and we were a four-man team doing the impossible again, just as my four-man teams had done in the past. If any of us had wasted time wishing we had Benny, it would have been time we couldn't afford to waste.

We weren't conscious of Smith any more than we were of one another. He was an integral part of the whole, and we couldn't function any other way.

It was noon of the second day when I stopped long enough to realize we'd pulled another one out of the fire. We had the job whipped and could afford to straighten up and look around us. The muddy water was already above the lowest steel braces in the side of the cliff, but a webwork of steel was bolted securely in place on both sides, and you could see the river was conceding defeat. It was turbulent and spiteful, eddying in swift whirlpools and roaring its frustration.

Suddenly the whole scene seemed calmly peaceful to me. Just an ordinary job moving along smoothly, when up to that moment it had been an electrified inferno of activity with success hanging in the balance.

Smith was at the controls of his rudely improvised boom and Walter was finishing up his anchor plates on the Mexican side. Larry had a mixer grinding out concrete into his forms on both sides of the river, and the steel erectors were calmly laying out their stuff for the end trusses. Blaine and the Mexican engineer were conferring together in front of the field office, and they both looked as smugly pleased with themselves as if they had figured out the whole deal.

On the other side of the river—the American side—a couple of well-dressed men were leaning over the cliff's edge to inspect the work beneath. You could tell they were big shots from the way they acted. Suddenly something went wrong with a block at the end of Smith's tree-trunk boom and there was a snarl of cable up there as he tried to lift a piece of steel to swing it across the river.

It looked like a bad tangle from where I stood, and I started down to the winch to take the control for him if he had to go up the boom to straighten it out.

I stopped before I'd gone very far. I hadn't paid much attention to Smith's end of things during the past forty-eight hours, and during that time he'd found a workman who could push the winch while he handled the rigging.

A feeling of pleasure went through me at this evidence of the thorough way Smith had taken hold and put everything out of

his mind except getting the work done. Some riggers I've known wouldn't have thought of a small detail like that, wouldn't have bothered to train a winchman during the stress Smith had been under, but it's just those small details that differentiate a real craftsman from those who don't quite succeed.

Smith left the workman at the winch and went hand over hand up the steep-sloping steel boom. I watched his big body snake upwards and out over the river to the end of steel and then up the roughly trimmed trunk of the pine extension.

I walked on down to the edge of the river while he hung on at the top with one hand and worked at the twisted cable with the other. One of the big shots on the American side looked up and recognized me and I knew I'd have to go over and make my report to them in person.

Well, the job was under control and I was ready to make my report. I nodded and waved that I'd be over, but the cable buckets were busy and I had to wait my turn.

Smith got the tangle loosened and signalled the winchman to take up the slack easy while he stepped down to a support on the boom and waited to see that it didn't snarl again.

A twenty-foot piece of steel was slung on the end of the cable ready for hoisting, and it was on the bank behind me. I saw the cable tighten easily and the steel slide towards the edge.

I stepped onto the steel and grabbed the cable for a ride across. My responsibility was ended and I wanted to turn the whole thing over to someone else and get some sleep.

The steel beam slid off the bank smoothly and out over the water. The winchman lifted it a few feet as we swung so it would clear the higher bank on the other side. I glanced up and waved at Smith riding the end of the boom above me—it looked like a goodwill gesture to thank him for the part he'd played in filling up my gang and helping me out of a tight spot.

I was half doped with weariness and lack of sleep, and as I waved, I shifted my weight just enough to unbalance the beam in its sling.

When a two-ton beam starts slipping, you don't readjust it by shifting your weight back. One end of it lifted up and I started riding the other end down towards the water. My one-hand grip on the cable wrenched loose and things happened fast. We were near enough to the American bank so that I could jump for the steel framework jutting out from the cliff.

I went into the roaring water, and as I hit, I remembered the remark Walter had made two days previously about a man's body being washed up at the other end of the canyon, miles below us, if he ever went into that fast water.

I was sucked under like a floating chip, and then heaved up and slammed on my right side against the steel I'd reached for. I got a left-hand grip, but the current was tearing at me and I knew I wouldn't last long. My right arm hung limp and I couldn't let go to grab the rope let down from above or the sling on the end of the cable which the winchman had let down for me when he saw what had happened.

There were people leaning over the edge above me shouting for me to hang on until they could let down a rope, but none of them seemed to realize that my right arm had been smashed and was useless.

None of them except Smith, who was perched high above me on the boom. Looking straight down, maybe his perspective was better. Anyhow, he caught on at once and he acted with the hair-trigger speed that drives a man instinctively at a time like that.

He swung out from the boom and caught the swinging cable and came down it towards me. I saw him coming and I wasn't surprised to see a killer risking his life to save mine. I knew that's the way construction men are built. They get that way working together on jobs where death is everywhere.

He hit the water beside me and got the sling between my legs and signalled the winchman. We went up with a jerk and swung out over dry land and the cable set us down gently together on American soil.

We were surrounded before we got untangled, and the two well-dressed chaps had hold of Smith before he could reach the gun under his wet coat. They flashed Ranger badges on him and took him away quietly. Back to El Paso to stand trial for strangling Lola.

Larry and Walter couldn't get over how queer it was the way everything happened so opportunely. They wondered how a guy like me could so far forget himself as to shift his weight on a delicately balanced steel beam while riding it across the river, and they thought my right arm healed mighty quick after having been hurt so badly that it was useless while I was in the water.

I never explained those things to them, nor how the Texas Rangers happened to be on hand when Smith came back to the American side. A repentant Benny Arentz was waiting to go on the next job with us when we got back to headquarters, and I don't think any of the three men needed to know that I had intentionally shuffled Benny aside that night in Juarez so we could take a killer along with us as a rigger in his place.

There were still other jobs to be done, and a boss isn't much good if his men begin to lose faith in him.

I think they might have understood and forgiven my deception if I'd told them the whole truth, but somehow that was part of the past I wanted to forget. I've always felt I was a poor brother to Lola, and it was partly my fault, I guess, that she ended up as she did in El Paso.

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ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 5

We are pleased to announce the three winners of Argosy's fifth Prize Crossword Competition :—

James C. Nevin Esq., Donaghadee Road, Bangor, Co. Down, Northern Ireland.

Miss A. Satterthwaite, Hotham Road, Cottingham Road, Hull, Yorks.

Dr. C. J. Thomas, Bembridge, Isle of Wight.

These readers, who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Cuckoo-pint.* 6, *Avid.* 10, *Usually.* 11, *Oversee.* 12, *Cato.* 13, *Jolly-boats.* 15, *Eddied.* 16, *Stetson.* 18, *Artiste.* 21, *Buzfuz.* 24, *Bored stiff.* 25, *Idea.* 27, *Infanta.* 28, *Liberal.* 29, *Soya.* 30, *Tenderfoot.*

Down. 1, *Clutch.* 2, *Crusted.* 3, *Owls.* 4, *Plywood.* 5, *Noodles.* 7, *Vestals.* 8, *Dressing.* 9, *Sea breeze.* 14, *Dissident.* 17, *Parboils.* 19, *Thrifty.* 20, *Eat cake.* 21, *Baffled.* 22, *Undergo.* 23, *Hamlet.* 26, *Ebor.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 8

Argosy's eighth Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first three correct solutions checked on the closing date. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to :

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 8),
3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.)

to arrive by Thursday, January 7th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale March 10th.

GUESTS OF MR. PANG

by AUSTIN COATES

Austin Coates, 30-year-old Assistant Colonial Secretary in the Hongkong Government, inherits his love of travel from his famous father, Eric Coates, who has conducted his own music in many parts of the world. His first book, "Invitation to an Eastern Feast," is a witty and perceptive account of oriental life and customs, seen not from a tourist's point of view but from the inside, by one who for a time adopted the local way of life. In this extract, the author describes an evening spent in the company of Pei-tak, his White Russian friend who has taken Chinese nationality.

★

AS we approached the town, I saw that fortune was with us and we would have a free dinner. Standing on the stone stairs where the sampan would land us after we had passed down the water avenue of shacks built on stilts over the sea which forms the entrance to Tai O was a Cantonese girl I had met while staying at the Sacred Lotus. She went to school in Hongkong, spoke good English, and her father was reputed to be a wealthy man in the district. Her company would be an immense asset, we would be at once introduced to the best in Tai O and could expect to spend a thoroughly enjoyable evening in good company.

She too seemed pleased to see us.

"Are you going up to the monastery?" she asked us, calling down before our sampan had even reached the steps.

Kou Pei-tak was delighted. "*Ah, on se sent à Venise!*" he murmured as we stepped ashore in the drab little town with its grey stone buildings, black fishing-nets hanging everywhere, and the dark treeless hills behind.

"No," I replied. "We're staying the night here."

For a second I thought the unexpected might happen and we would be invited to put up at their house. She hesitated for a moment and then said: "But to go to the police station you should have got out at the mouth of the bay."

We explained we were not staying at the police station. She took stock of this, reoriented us mentally, and then graciously indicated the building at the end of the little street we were standing in.

" There's the hotel," she said.

Pei-tak, who knew exactly where the inn was, was overcome with gratitude to her for having told us where it was; she assured us she had done nothing.

Her rather prettier younger sister appeared from a balcony and waved a welcome to us, and into this characteristically French first act walked the girls' father.

Mr. Pang wore pale blue Chinese trousers and jacket, clogs on his bare feet, and a dark grey woollen sweater under his jacket. He was about fifty-five, with a narrow lined face and close-cropped grey hair. Some of his rather too prominent teeth had been filled and secured by badly-made silver and gold stoppings.

Seeing us, he bowed in the little straight stiff way of the Chinese but said nothing, all his gold and silver teeth glistening in a broad smile.

His elder daughter said something to him in Cantonese and we at once realized that though the daughters spoke English the father did not.

" My father says will you come and call at our house ? "

The father had said nothing, so possibly we were doing better than expected.

" Let us put our things in the inn first," said Pei-tak, " then we will come back."

There were the usual protests of thanks and protests that nothing but the meanest hospitality was being offered us, the little stage piece which concludes every Chinese meeting but which in India would be looked upon with suspicion.

" Very satisfactory," my friend murmured as we moved off between the little shops to the inn.

" Where do you think he gets his money ? " I asked. " He must have spent quite a lot on those girls."

" He probably has some respectable small shop," said Pei-tak, to whom everything in Kwangtung was immensely refined and respectable after spending ten years in Yunnan with twenty days' walk to the nearest road.

" I didn't notice any shop underneath their house."

" Well," he said, " perhaps it's in some more exclusive quarter of the city."

There was not much exclusiveness about Tai O; one was either on this side of the muddy inlet or on that, with a ferry-

sampan (known as the shuttle service) connecting the two sides and run by two old women for slightly under one penny a time.

The inn was also a two-storey building, and was built over a small eating-house and barber's shop. To enter, one walked into the barber's shop and up the stairs at the back; none but the initiated would ever have found the door. Pei-tak moved towards it at once by instinct.

The interior conformed with that of all the best Chinese inns, so Pei-tak was happy. There were no China-coast refinements like wireless sets or electric light, but I noticed there were plenty of mirrors, on the stairs, in the *salle de réception* and in all the bedrooms—and in China you always judge a hotel by the number of mirrors it has.

"*C'est classique*," he murmured contentedly.

Architecturally it was all one room, the divisions between one guest's room and another being wooden partitions which in no case reached as high as the ceiling. Sounds therefore carried and it looked as though we were in for a restless night. Each little room had a double bed rather narrower than a European bed; this was called a single room. A double room consisted of two double beds, and if one felt like sleeping three extra on the floor, that did not matter; the charge for the room was still four shillings.

Apart from mirrors the rooms had a table with an enamel bowl for washing and a jug of cold water below, as well as the indispensable flask of hot water for drinking, with two small porcelain drinking-pots.

Pei-tak looked in to examine my room. "*Un vrai Waldorf, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Pei-tak, what do you think they'll give us to drink at dinner?"

He looked serious. "That is a problem. You see, I don't know these Cantonese people. They may give brandy and whisky like the dreadful Hongkong people, but I'm sure if we make enough fuss we shall be able to get Chinese wine."

"In any case, I think a pot of beer first."

"An excellent idea."

We instructed the foki to lock our rooms and descended to street level.

Finding beer in Tai O was not easy. The eating-house below the inn looked to me as though it might stock it, but turned out not to.

"Too many mirrors," Pei-tak snorted. "Inns yes, but eating-houses no. Many mirrors, bad food."

Finally we came across a grocer's which seemed to sell everything from kerosene to dried fish, and to our delight he indicated

that he could produce some beer. One of his sons went down to the cellar and a choice of two brands was offered. Happily, too, there was none of the trouble of drinking clandestinely in an unlicensed house. We sat down at the corner of the street and drank in full view of passers-by, using the grocer's pots.

The time now seemed, after two bottles, to be ripe for our return to the Pangs' house, but Pei-tak, bristling with Chinese officialdom, informed me otherwise.

"Not yet. They expect us to be late. They expect us, in fact, to cause them the greatest inconveniences. This is entirely fitting to the situation; we shall have another pot of this first."

So we drank some more until we reckoned that they were by now entirely inconvenienced by our delay and that we could therefore enter their house with due face, having been delayed in our coming by other more pressing and weighty business.

"You don't know these country people," he remarked. "So hospitable; not like Hongkong."

And for a moment, lulled perhaps by the beer, I began to think we were back in the friendly atmosphere of the southern lands, sitting with Portuguese and Straits-born Chinese fishermen on the shore at Malacca while the youngest sons scaled the palm trees to bring down the coconuts to drink, the sea rolled on the sand with no more than a caress and a storm was brewing far across the Strait over Sumatra. In those lands was the same kind of hospitality Pei-tak meant, from fishermen who lived in a mat hut on the beach, yet whose wives received guests like any queen; there was a sympathy and fellow-feeling there between one person and another deeper than anything in this cold land of introductions and ornamental banter. But those were lands Pei-tak had never seen.

As he had forecast we were received with great ceremony at the house, but I noticed at the same time that I was right about Mr. Pang not owning the shop below. I was more than ever puzzled. In Tai O a man of his standing, if he did not own a shop, must have owned salt-pans, and I knew Pang certainly did not own salt-pans because these were all the property of the plutocrat with whom we had travelled on the ferry.

We were brought upstairs. It was by this time a little late for eating, the Chinese dinner-time being six o'clock, the hour the ferry-boat had come in; and therefore, smelling no cooking in the house, we expected the old man was going to invite us to take food in an eating-house or else order the eating-house to send a meal round. Both would have been classical, the second method possibly a little more so.

The upper rooms looked over the inlet, over the tiled roofs of the little town, to the western sea, over which a yellow sunset coldly glowed, and to the hills which, apart from this one outlet to freedom of view, surrounded the little town on every side. There were some of the usual blackwood chairs with marble seats generally found in the room where the ancestral tablets are, a table covered with the younger daughter's school-books and the usual calendars (though this time not of half-nude women) as the only wall decoration.

At the end of the room was the ancestral altar, although there were no pictures of the two ancestors, only their names being inscribed in heavy and rather showy characters which someone in Hongkong or Canton had evidently been paid a good fee to make. Around the tablets were the usual strips of red paper with auspicious sayings on them in black.

An old woman in black with silver hair, listless from chronic malaria and with that expressionless look in her eyes that one often finds among orientals who have never mixed with people of other races, bowed to us as we came in, but I sensed that she was not the mother of Pang's children. She appeared to be a second wife; Pang may even have been her second husband. She wanted us to sit down at once and found it peculiar that we should first wish to take a look at the view from their windows.

When we re-entered the room from the balcony she put a tin of toffees in her elder daughter's hand and these were in turn offered to us. We both declined; toffees between *apéritif* and dinner were more than we could stand. We both saw nothing strange in the offer, however; Cantonese with their incredible liking for sugary things seem capable of eating toffees at any time. We sat at the table and talked.

Old Pang wandered off somewhere—I thought at first to make an order at the eating-house; but as one quarter-after another passed without a sign of food coming, it became apparent to us both that we had mistaken the family's intention. This was not Yunnan, nor was it Burma or Malaya.

Not even tea was offered. This was not only neglectful; it would have been almost insulting had not the dignity of the reception they had given us counteracted it somewhat and made us realize that the reason it was not offered was probably due to a fear that, being westerners, we might not like it.

The younger daughter—"*Elle est plus jolie que l'autre*," Pei-tak commented; he was apt to talk several languages in one breath—was telling us about her school classes. She was older than an English schoolgirl of her standard of education, having

been held up by the need to go to a Chinese school first to learn Chinese and then to an English school. She was a fervent Catholic and, though she said nothing about it, was evidently moving emotionally towards a declaration that she wished to be a nun.

The elder, who had had a touch of smallpox, was—in Pei-tak's words—"*plus laïque*," a description which expressed volumes (in which picnics, motor cars, the beach at Repulse Bay, dancing at the Lido, boys, and the generally wicked Hong-kong society played a not inconspicuous part). By that ancient twist of fortune that linked them in their unknown and remote fishing village with sisters described in the literature of many a famous land, the one with the looks did not want to marry and the one without them did.

I dismissed the thought that they might have dined already before the ferry-boat came, for on the arrival of guests such a misfortune means nothing; with admirable composure Chinese are able on such occasions to eat a second dinner shortly after the first and convey every appearance of being happy to be at table. There was no other conclusion; they did not intend, and they had not intended, to give us a bite to eat.

"Well," I said, "it's time we went to look for our supper. Which eating-house do you recommend?"

They looked at each other and giggled.

"Sing Kee is supposed to be the best," the elder one replied in the manner of a girl who, living in Ealing, dreams of dining at a Mayfair hotel.

"That is the one I went to before," said Pei-tak. "You see, it has a local reputation; this is very important."

He was of course pleased that the one he had selected after his first walk round the place was considered the best by the natives. He was not to be deceived by mirrors.

There was nothing else for it. We got up and took our leave. There was not a word of protest, no last-minute invitation to take tea. As we went carefully down the dark narrow stairs to the street I was laughing inside.

We found the eating-house. It was a prosperous place with an upper floor, its ground floor being devoted entirely to cooking and to a stall in which an elderly relative of the proprietor sold Chinese wines and American cigarettes. From the look of him, he would also have known where to obtain opium. Beyond the stall, which was in the doorway, lay the slaughtering-block and kitchen, a kerosene refrigerator, several hen-coops, and a latrine. At the back ran the waters of the inlet—the Grand Canal, as Pei-tak was now calling it.

As we entered we were invited to mount the stairs to the tables on the upper floor, but instead of doing this and having a bad dinner ordered from a menu card, we moved two fokis out of our way and opened the refrigerator to see what there was to eat. Having selected a fish, a lobster, and several prawns, we left instructions with the cook how to prepare them and with what vegetables, and retired above.

The place was quiet at that hour and there was only one party of about eight people in the best place, a little raised room overlooking the Grand Canal. Moving up to take the only other table, adjacent to theirs and with a similar view, we found old Pang was the party's host, and that while we had been sitting waiting to be offered food he had quietly slipped away to take his dinner here. They had now just finished.

Our arrival discountenanced him; he had not expected two foreign devils to be so acute as to find the best eating-place and had clearly imagined that in walking out and leaving us at home with his second wife he had seen the last of us for the day. For this mistake he now had to suffer prolonged social torture.

Nothing is so fascinating to Chinese as to watch foreigners ordering Chinese food, giving exact instructions about the order in which it is to be served and elaborating doubtful points by writing the characters of what they want on small pieces of paper. Sometimes they become so devoured with curiosity that they can hardly bear to leave one alone, this in fact being one of the sole moments in social life when Chinese will break all convention and do their utmost to make conversation. Again and again, too, I have ordered meals in the country only to find a Chinese party sitting close to mine watching each of my dishes as it arrived and ordering exactly the same things for themselves.

Poor Pang had not reckoned with this peculiarity in his guests. They were the respectable people (with ties) who had been travelling in the ferry with the salt-pan king. Now, having paid their respects to the latter, they were being fêted by another of Tai O's monarchs, of more mysterious wealth.

The trouble started when the cook sent up the wrong dish first and we sent it back. Cantonese, except on formal occasions, do not mind very much in what order they eat the dishes they have ordered. Our action, therefore, astonished our neighbours, for, as with so many things about Pei-tak's management of affairs, though he might seem over-insistent about minor points he was none the less correct, and our neighbours were impressed. Then when the foki offered brandy and we brushed him aside as a nitwit, obtained the services of the senior foki, ordered Chinese wine in small earthenware pots, and scrutinized the

labels with care before finally ordering the pots to be opened, Pang's guests were beside themselves.

One of them, unable to restrain himself any longer, began one of the classic conversations beginning, " You like Chinese food ? " to which we were both by now curiously resistant, merely smiling in return and raising our cups to drink, thus leaving the fellow with no alternative but to stay mum or begin the next classic, which starts, " You know how to use chopsticks ? "

Finally the prawns arrived, and having fixed everything to our liking we began, a sip of wine, a joke, a mouthful of food, an anecdote, a little toast, another prawn. It was all classical..

Unfortunately, our attempts to keep the others at bay proved unsuccessful. When we raised our glasses the more daring ones merely raised theirs as well and drank with us, and by the time we had finished our prawns three or four of Pang's guests had deserted their table and were more or less sitting at ours.

Pei-tak was not at all impressed by this display of bad manners, although it had to be admitted that it was a perfect lesson for Pang—if we had dined with him his rather dull dinner would have been a hilarious party—and when one of the gentlemen, who turned out to be a district official (one of the classic China-coast type that knows all about foreigners), turned up his nose at our Chinese wine and said, " Why don't you drink brandy ? They've got very good brandy here; we've all been taking it," another of Pei-tak's moments of bristling officialdom had come.

" Mr. Mok," he said seriously, wiping a spot off one of his spectacles, " I have lived in China for thirty-three years, and if you are telling me that brandy is the proper drink to take with Chinese food I can only say——"

The unhappy Mok silenced him with a polite flow of apologies.

But we had gained the situation. Mr. Pang, to retain a hold over his guests, was obliged to reverse his position on his stool and face our table. We continued eating, unconcerned. The lobster was served.

It appeared that he wanted to send his younger daughter to the University. He took the opportunity of questioning me, through Mok as interpreter, about the possibilities of this. In less than no time one of the guests was dispatched to bring the girls to our table. They came, settled down, toyed with cups of tea, and answered questions. The other guests became bored by this business conversation and drifted off as guests are able to once the meal has finished. Finally old Pang had said good-bye to the last of them, the daughters had gone to bed, and we were left in peace to take rice with a dish of soup provided gratis by the eating-house as a mark of respect.

"These Cantonese! What manners!" my companion muttered.

A figure appeared at the door of our cubicle but we neither of us looked up, thinking it was the foki come to see we had everything we wanted. After a moment, when the figure did not move, I glanced up to see why he stayed there so long. I gave a little murmur of surprise.

It was old Pang. Repentant, he had returned after the last guest had been bidden good night, and was waiting to be invited to sit with us. Even Pei-tak melted, and with ceremony dusted a stool for him to sit on. It was another social triumph.

The problem now arose, however, having got the gentleman seated, how to conduct a conversation with him. Pei-tak tried saying simple things to him in Mandarin but without any success whatever; the old chap merely smiled affably but obviously understood nothing. We then resorted to writing, and the foki was ordered to bring small pieces of paper, such as are used in China for wiping one's mouth on during a meal.

The paper was produced (as an Englishman, one has to learn not to laugh at the close similarity the Chinese paper used on these occasions has to cut-up pieces of toilet-roll). The old boy was delighted when things were written down for him. At the same time he kept talking to the young foki, who in turn was looking over the old man's shoulder at the paper and talking also. Pang made a reply which the foki, who could speak a few words of Mandarin, translated with a strong Cantonese accent; it was sufficient for Pei-tak to understand, and thus the conversation proceeded until the boy said something Pei-tak could not understand.

"No, no, I'm lost," he said to me, and offering the old man the paper and pencil he asked him to write down what he had said.

Pang hesitated; finally he indicated that the foki would explain to us. The foki wrote in a neat even handwriting what Pang meant.

Pang did not once glance at the paper to see whether the foki was writing down what he intended. His mind did not, in fact, seem to relate itself in any way to the paper or the pencil.

I realized he could neither read nor write.

The characters took quite a time to write (he was evidently saying something polite) and as this went on the identity of Mr. Pang became clear to me.

He was, of course, an ex-fisherman, a member of that seafaring community that lives and dies afloat, speaks a language of its own, and seldom if ever owns property ashore. How he had come to forsake his own folk and live ashore one could only

guess, but the place having been for centuries a strategic point for the trade of the Pearl River bandits suggested a possible solution to me. More than any landsman, he was probably acquainted with some of the bandits, and what more reasonable arrangement than that at one time he acted as a go-between ashore. Certainly, his real story would never be entirely known, for nowhere quicker than in China does the past become veiled in rumour, surmise, and unreliable anecdote. That was my theory about him, anyway.

In this quiet spot his second daughter had become converted to the Catholic Church and was going to the University. At the same time, many of the leading bandits called in regularly (discreetly, of course, like any ordinary fisherman, simply to play a game of mah-jong and smoke a pipe or two of opium). He was thus able to keep abreast of events.

The foki finished his writing and showed Pei-tak the paper.

" Really, this is very hospitable," he said, reading. " He says he has paid for everything we have taken."

I was about to turn and thank Mr. Pang when Pei-tak rebuked me: " Come on ! What are you doing ? You can't accept."

" Well, what am I to do ? "

" Create a disturbance, seize the foki by the arm, drag him downstairs towards the cash-desk and thrust ten dollars into his hand. Make a noise, do anything."

I did what I was told. Seizing the foki, I rushed him to the bottom of the stairs and thrust a ten-dollar bill into his hand.

I then realized that indeed it was classical. The foki understood the situation entirely, implored me to take the money back; I insisted, the rumpus increased, people turned round and looked, and by the time I was with great politeness entreated by the foki to return to the table, everyone in the eating-house knew that Mr. Pang had paid for our dinner and that we were not ignorant of the manners to be used in accepting Chinese hospitality.

Our host then provided us with two bottles of iced beer to drink after dinner, ordered the staff to charge to him whatever else we might spend there that evening, bowed to us with his face alive with kindness and respect, and departed.

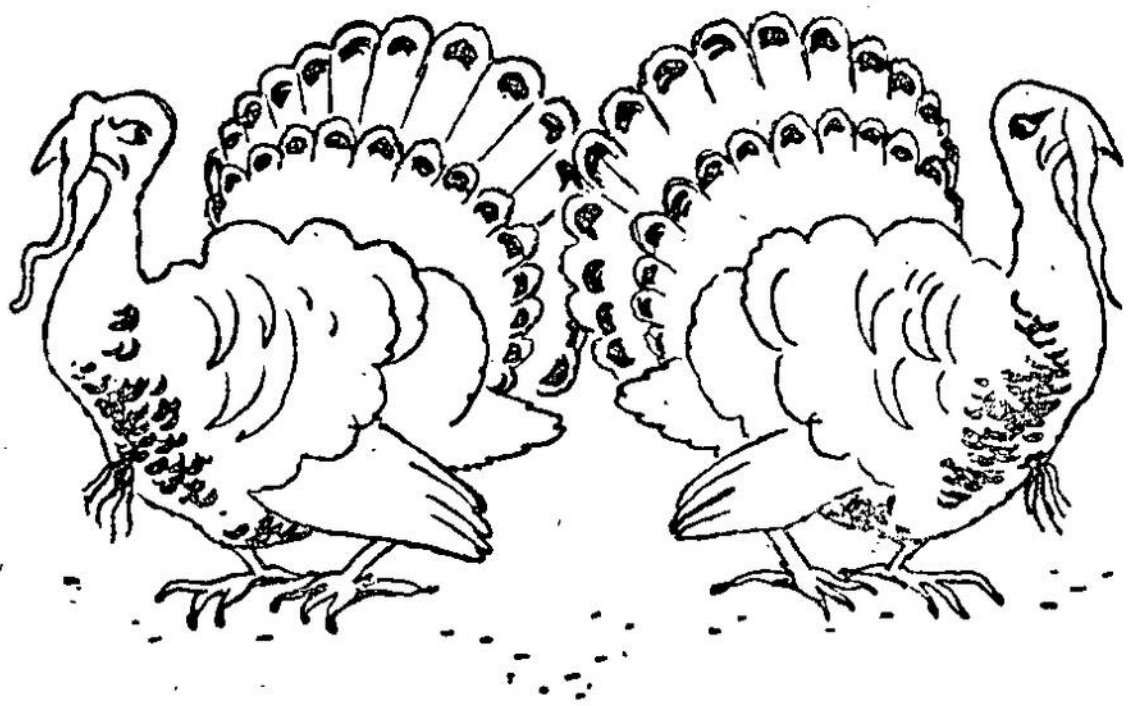
For once we were both speechless.

★ ★ ★

The superior man understands what is right ; the inferior man understands what will sell.

CONFUCIUS, 551-478 B.C.

WELL-DRESSED TURKEY



by ANDRÉ VILLERS

DEMOSTHENES PANAMAKIS'S store, at Luvungura, an eastern trading-post in the Belgian Congo, had only seven European customers, counting Panamakis himself and his wife. But these customers were all the more loyal as there was no other shop within a radius of twenty miles.

One morning Martinet, the sanitary officer, came in, gazed slowly along the shelves, bought a tin of sardines, and ordered a bottle of beer.

Then he asked the question that had become almost a ritual: " And how are the turkeys ? "

" Very well, Monsieur Martinet. They'll put on another pound or two before Christmas, the splendid creatures ! "

" You haven't forgotten the tinned truffles, Panamakis ? "

" No, Monsieur Martinet. They were delivered yesterday. By the way, in the same consignment there were six jars of cherries in brandy. Just look at that, will you ? If that isn't a calamity ! "

Under his client's nose the storekeeper put a jar where greenish cherries floated under a thick layer of mould. " Fermented," said the sanitary officer, with indifference. He preferred his brandy neat.

" More than four hundred francs' worth there. A calamity ! " Panamakis repeated, obviously affected by this financial catastrophe.

When Martinet had finished his beer and left, carrying his tin of sardines in the holster of his belt, the storekeeper called his native boy, pointed to the cherries, and ordered: "Go and throw them into the bush. But bring back the jars."

This order was to have important repercussions.

When, on his return from a trip to the local capital, Panamakis had announced to the Europeans of Luvungura that he had brought back half a dozen turkeys and was going to fatten them up for Christmas, he was warmly congratulated on this splendid display of initiative. Turkeys are rare in Ituri, and the prospect of such a banquet put the inhabitants of the post into an agreeable frame of mind.

They would all forgather at the store before dinner to take an *apéritif* and to admire the young fowls. Madame Panamakis, who was responsible for fattening them up, was overwhelmed with advice of this kind and that—most of it contradictory—which she continued, in any case, to ignore.

The turkeys had been entrusted to her cook's son, a piccaninny who immediately displayed a remarkable natural talent for the work, which consisted in strolling idly near the shop the whole day through. The salary for this task was ten francs a week.

Towards the end of the day when this story begins, the young keeper rushed to his employer in a state of obvious agitation, and cried out to her: "*N'deke anakufa iote!*" Which means: all the turkeys are dead.

Although no longer so slender as she once was, Madame Panamakis rushed off in the direction the boy indicated. Behind the hedge of mulberries that bounded the courtyard, a pitiful sight awaited her: the six turkeys were prostrate in the dust, their beaks ajar and their feet in the air.

She felt the limp bodies, which were still warm, boxed the ears of the piccaninny, who had been rash enough to draw near, and went off to break the news to her husband.

The entire white population of the post was propped up at the counter. The tragic news was met at first with incredulity, then with consternation.

"They must have been bitten by a snake," was the suggestion of Bostenaer, the mechanic from the cotton factory. But Martinet rejected the idea of a serpent so deadly as to vanquish six birds, each one weighing fifteen pounds. No one seriously suspected the boy, for everyone knew that he was keen on his job, and he would hardly have killed the birds that laid the golden eggs (of ten francs a week).

The barren discussion on the causes of this sextuple decease

threatened to drag on indefinitely, when Razuret, the territorial agent, put an end to it by making a reasonable proposal.

" All we know is that they are dead. But there's nothing to suggest that they aren't eatable. Let Martinet perform an autopsy, and if they are fit to eat, as I believe they are, we can have our Christmas dinner tomorrow night. After all, it'll be only three weeks in advance."

Madame Panamakis ordered the cook and his helpers to pluck the birds. When this was finished, she examined each golden wrinkle of the skin, but could see no suspicious mark. It was all as mysterious as ever, but the hope of a banquet, even a premature one, raised the spirits of the assembled company so much that double the usual number of bottles of beer was emptied that evening.

At break of dawn the following day, the storekeeper was wakened by a fairly loud noise, which clearly came from the shop.

He slapped the blanketed mound by his side and hissed at his wife: " Thieves ! There are thieves in the shop ! "

He turned up the wick of the storm lamp that served as a night-light, and got out of bed.

" Demosthenes, take your gun ! Be careful ! "

This womanly advice was hardly necessary. Demosthenes was careful, and he was already clutching his gun in a rather shaky hand. He kicked open the door of the store where the strange noises were still to be heard, and shouted, " Hands up or I fire ! "

No reply to this command, harsh though it was. Panamakis then stretched out his hand that held the lantern, and he almost collapsed, not out of fear but shock. Stark naked, six turkeys were strutting round the shop.

Panamakis let his gun fall—he had forgotten to load it, anyway —and tottered into the bedroom with small, staggering footsteps, for his nightshirt was so narrow that he couldn't take a proper stride.

His wife, sitting up in bed, was anxiously waiting for her husband's return.

" Daphne," he said, in a voice that trembled with emotion, " there are no thieves. It's the dead turkeys walking about."

Madame Panamakis opened her mouth, but no sound came. Her husband realized that some further explanation might come in handy, and added, " Yes. Walking about the shop. And, what's more, stark naked."

Still speechless, his wife rose, draped her majestic form in a

peignoir, and made for the shop. The first rays of the sun were coming in through the windows.

Madame Panamakis had to give in to the evidence of her eyes: her husband had not suddenly gone off his head.

Roused by a boy, Martinet arrived at the store without having paused either to wash or to shave.

"What's this idiotic story that this idiot boy tells me?" he asked.

" It's absolutely true, Monsieur Martinet. Our turkeys have risen from the dead."

" No ! " was all that the thunderstruck sanitary officer could bring out. Then a wild, irrepressible laugh burst from him at the sight of the birds mincing up and down before the counter.

The door was open now, and the turkeys stalked towards the road in single file. The sanitary officer's professional *sang-froid* was restored. " Hi," he said, " they can't stay like that ! They'll get sunstroke."

Outside, a crowd had already gathered. Natives on their way to work had formed a circle around the flock.

Suddenly it dawned on Martinet. " I see ! " he exclaimed. " You threw away those spoilt cherries in brandy, didn't you ? Those wretched birds must have gobbled them up. They weren't *dead*, they were dead drunk ! "

At this point Bostenaer and Razurel arrived on the scene. When they had given full vent to their first reactions, they all settled down to a practical consideration of the problems created by this unforeseen resurrection of their Christmas dinners.

Martinet was right. The turkeys could not go round in this unclothed state under the glaring Congo sun.

" We must just wring their necks at once and eat them this evening," the territorial officer proposed.

" If we kept them in the shade, perhaps ? In an outhouse ? "

" They would fade right away."

Madame Panamakis was standing there, listening. Of course, one wouldn't go so far as to suggest that it was the sight of her generous form, still wrapped in its morning gown, that gave Martinet his remarkable idea: " What if one were to make them six little *peignoirs* ? "

For a moment there was silence. Then all eyes turned on Madame Panamakis, who had a considerable reputation as a dressmaker among the elegant negresses of the region. She nodded. " Perhaps that's not a bad idea . . . It wouldn't take long, on the sewing-machine . . . And we have a little flowered cloth in stock that would do very nicely . . ."

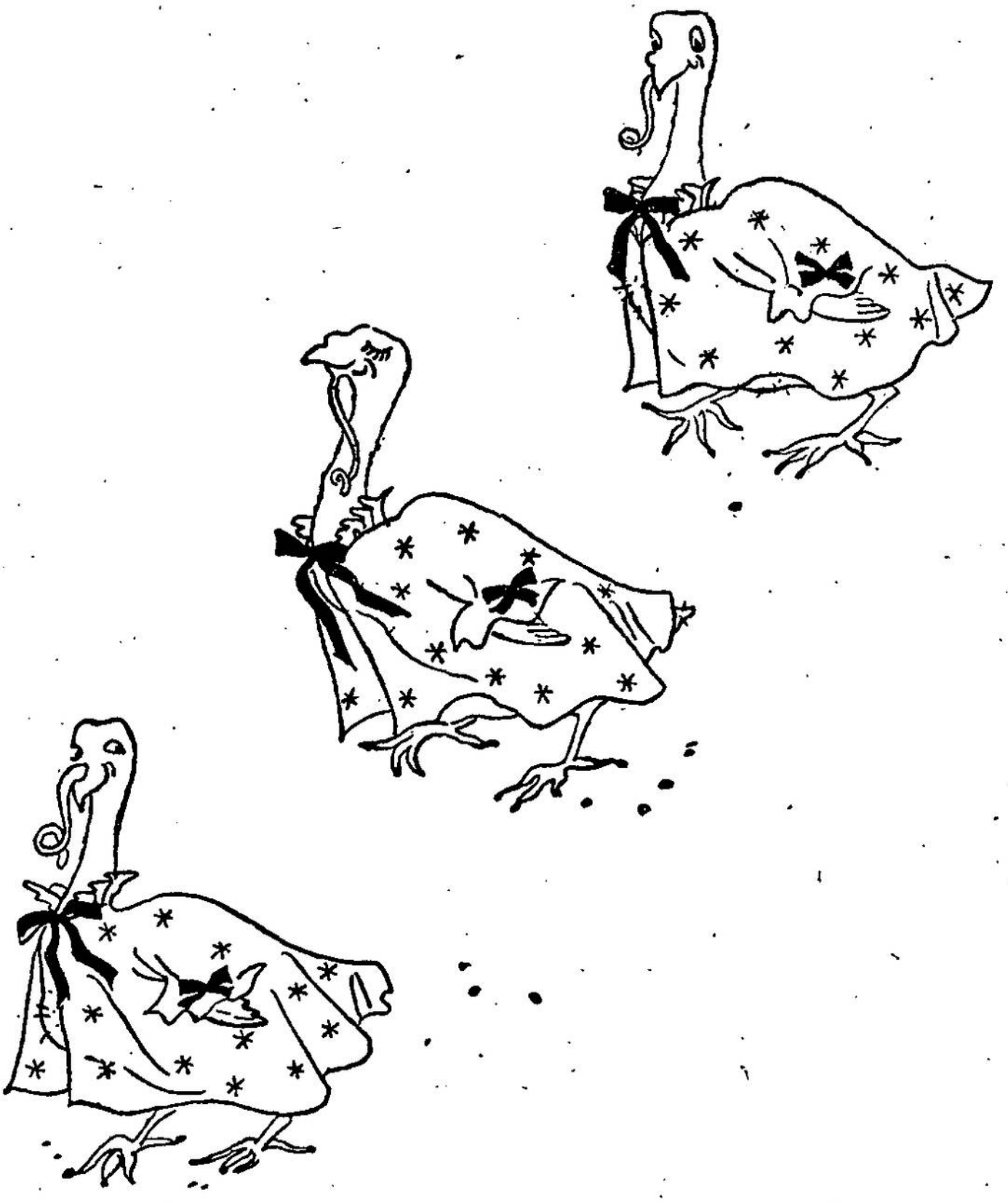
The shadow of a blush spread over her face, and she added,

lowering her eyes: " And, at all events, it would be more . . . proper . . ."

If you happen one day to be passing by Luvungura, in Ituri, go and have a beer at Panamakis's. It's cool there, and the *patron* is a good fellow. He will tell you this story—with more picturesque detail, certainly, than I have done.

And if you aren't convinced, he will take out an enlargement showing six turkeys strutting proudly along the road—dressed in the most elegant *peignoirs*, made out of a brightly-coloured material by Madame Panamakis.

Translated by J. E. MALCOLM



THE STORY OF ESTHER COSTELLO

by NICHOLAS MONSARRAT

AUSTRALIA loved Esther. Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney—they flocked to her meetings, gave with both hands. Esther was presented with a half-life-size toy kangaroo, containing a cheque for two thousand Australian pounds tucked into its pouch. She was photographed against a background of Sydney Harbour, with the caption: WISHES SHE COULD SEE IT.

"Too bad you had to delay the trip," said a man in Melbourne to Mrs. Bannister. "Doesn't seem to have made much difference to the public, though."

"We just *couldn't* leave England," said Mrs. Bannister. "You know how it is when you get tied up."

New Zealand loved her. Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch—they drove in from hundreds of miles around, just to spend an hour at one of her meetings. They gave her a stuffed kiwi, with a purse full of sovereigns in its beak. . . .

South Africa loved her. Johannesburg, Durban, Bloemfontein, Cape Town—it was impossible to keep the crowds away. Her progress up Adderley Street in Cape Town rivalled the visit of the Royal Family. She was given the freedom of Johannesburg, a Zulu shield and spear in Durban, and a walking-stick decorated with pure white beads in Pretoria. In the Orange Free State she was taken down a gold mine, and photographed holding a gold ingot, with the foreseeable caption: GOLDEN GIRL.

"What held you up?" asked a reporter in Johannesburg. "We were expecting you three months ago."

"We had to delay our start," answered Mrs. Bannister. "Esther overtaxed her strength in London."

Canada loved her. Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto—wherever she appeared, she was greeted as though she brought a long-awaited message from another world. In Quebec, six thousand French-Canadian children acclaimed her with songs round a camp-fire. She was made an honorary member of the premier ice-hockey team, and photographed with four red-tunicked Mounted Police under the heading: MOUNTIES GET THEIR GIRL.

★

Esther Costello, a young Irish girl, blind, deaf, and dumb since a childhood accident, is taken to America in the hope of a cure, by a wealthy Bostonian, Mrs. Bannister. The case arouses great sympathy, particularly in a young reporter, Barry Grant. But medical treatments fail. Through Mrs. Bannister's loving patience, Esther is taught to communicate in deaf-and-dumb language, and the two of them start giving meetings, at which money is collected for Esther and for the blind.

When Mrs. Bannister's ne'er-do-well husband reappears suddenly, the whole situation changes. With the help of Jack Lett, a manufacturer of novelties, and by blackmailing his own wife, Captain Bannister takes charge, and " promotes " Esther into an international figure, the centre of a charitable racket as shady as it is profitable. His interest is not wholly commercial. Esther has grown into a radiantly lovely girl of nineteen, and he finds her physical attractions irresistible.

In London, on the first stage of their world tour, Bannister seizes his opportunity, and against all codes of human decency, violates the helpless girl. The shock of this outrage achieves what medical treatment had failed to do—and what perhaps even Mrs. Bannister no longer hopes for—it restores Esther's powers of sight, hearing, and speech.

The Third Part of Esther's story opens on the world tour.

★

America loved her for coming back to them again. Chicago, Cleveland, Washington, New York—it was a triumphal progress, ecstatic, warm-hearted, as if they had to make up to her for her nine months' exile among the barbarians. Even Jack Lett, who had always been worried about the long time spent abroad, had no complaints about their welcome.

The Chicago branch of the club (Windy City Tapalongs) greeted her at the U.S.-Canadian border with a mile-long torchlight procession which gave the police and the fire department a completely sleepless night. Washington (prompted by Jack Lett) planned to give her the millionth flask of Esther Costello Healing Oil, at a presentation ceremony under the shadow of the Capitol.

Barry Grant of the Boston *Star-Telegram* met them at Washington airport.

" Expected you a lot earlier," he said, smiling at Mrs. Bannister as he shook her hand. " You were a long time in England—they said you almost went into hiding. Is there a story there ? "

" Not a paragraph," said Mrs. Bannister decisively. " Esther just had to rest before the world tour . . ." She looked up at him: it was fine to see his tall, rangy, unexpected figure, after all the strange places and the thousands of miles of travelling. " But what are you doing in Washington ? "

" Covering the welcome home . . . It's a nice break from Boston." He looked across at Esther, standing immobile under the wing of the aircraft as the flash-bulbs exploded. " And pretty good to see you all again."

Barry Grant had not always felt that way about the assignment. Four days before, when Ryan, the news-editor, had called him into his office and told him to cover the latter half of Esther's homecoming, from Washington to Boston, he had been ready to argue about it. Yet another two years on the *Star-Telegram*, with little measurable progress to show for them, had given an obtrusive edge to Grant's self-confidence. If you said " yes " to everyone, he had learnt, no one said " yes " to you.

" Esther Costello ? " he repeated, on a rising note, as if Ryan had said—Write a very long piece about Father Christmas. " Esther Costello ? What's new there ? People know the story by heart, already."

" She's been away for nine months, raising all kinds of money," answered Ryan. He liked Barry Grant for sticking his chin out a bit, but it wasn't going to interfere with his assignments on the paper. Not yet, anyway. " That makes it a triumphant homecoming. I want you to go along with them, and cover the finish of the tour, from that angle. *Intimate story of Boston's own heroine. Blind Goddess Returns*—we haven't used that one yet."

Barry Grant frowned. " I hope we never shall. You mean, all the way to Washington, just for that ? "

" And New York as well. You'll love it."

" I'm not a travelling man. It's the same old story, in any case. I can write it from here."

Ryan looked surprised, even hurt: it was his least convincing expression. " I thought you'd jump at it. It's *your* story, Barry. You've done more than anyone else to put Esther on the map."

Grant shrugged. " More's the pity. I think she's a racket, anyway."

" How ? "

" Oh, I don't mean a *racket*, like protection or the horses. The girl's a marvel, and she makes all the money there is for the blind. It's just "—he gestured irritably—" it's not like it was at the beginning. It's too organized, too much of a circus."

" That's what brings the money in."

" Sure. But it isn't *Esther*. There's too much streamlining—

managers, Press hand-outs, clubs, uniforms. And then the meetings themselves—it's too much of an act, all the way through. Sure, it raises money! But she's *too* helpless, *too* clever, *too* radiating. Too many people pay to come in, too many people cry. Of course it's a miracle, but the miracle's been crowded out by too many other things—at top prices." He paused. "Can I write it that way?"

"No."

When Barry Grant had gone, Ryan switched to the next job; but his thoughts kept returning, now and then, to their discussion, and the return was not comfortable. Basically, he agreed with what Grant had said about Esther Costello: she *was* a racket—and the charity-angle didn't alter the fact of racketeering, either.

Esther was now one of an accepted company, whose role in life was to excite, first disgust, and then a liberal pity in the passers-by. One could not blame the victims themselves, when they cashed in on their handicaps. The world owed them something.

Esther Costello, for example, could not be blamed for her blind eyes, her hideous voice which was now being trained to ape human tones; and she was entitled to extract from the world, which had thus punished her, the reward of free upkeep. But there *were* bad characters involved, and they were the people who had elected themselves as the showmen. Such, to his mind, was Mrs. Bannister, who rode to glory on triple chargers: Esther Costello's inhuman squeaks, stunning good looks, and immensely talented silence.

But the public liked it that way, and the *Star-Telegram* had to be sold to the public. It would have been fine to let Barry Grant write the kind of piece he wanted; but that wouldn't have fitted the formula, and the formula sold the paper, and the paper paid the salary list. With newspapers, nothing operated in a vacuum—least of all, Truth.

Ryan himself had an ulcer, and a wife who saw herself, inaccurately, as a spur to greatness. He would never be an editor: he just had a job to keep, a good job. Grant might be an editor. Esther Costello was undoubtedly a racket. Ryan turned back to his desk, leaving the ethics for someone else to pick up.

Barry Grant, being a good newspaperman, did his best with the assignment, using the method of attack laid down in the manual of instruction—that was, to dig out what was new about it, and then to send as much of that as the paper was likely to print. It was waste of time, he knew, to write what he really thought about the "streamlining" of Esther Costello, the slick presentation of her which never took a false public step: he couldn't describe, for example, Jack Lett's particular part in the promotion.

He *could* write that Esther seemed to be more popular and successful than ever, and that she and Mrs. Bannister had evolved a completely new technique: Esther could now "hear" Mrs. Bannister's voice, by placing her hand on the other woman's mouth, and she could produce in return an approximation of human

tones—a kind of high-pitched, monotone gabble which Mrs. Bannister then translated verbatim to the audience.

He could write of the enormous ovation they received in Washington, and the preparations for the corresponding welcome-rally in New York. He could write of his own privileged position, living in the same hotel with the family, sharing their private as well as their public life. He could not add that the hotel bills must be fantastic, or that Captain Charles Bannister now had a valet, thirty-seven suits, and a complexion like a badly-executed sunset.

But though there was much that would never be set down in print, this did not stop him observing and correlating the facts. He was far too good a reporter to miss the likely items, even though they would not be used this side of the Last Trump. There were always things you noted down, although you knew they would never see the printed page, and never be heard of outside the local Press Club bar. During the time he spent with the Esther Costello organization—that was how it must now be phrased—he assembled a valuable collection of these, for his private filing system.

He observed that Mrs. Bannister now ran the whole thing: Jack Lett was preoccupied with production questions, and Captain Bannister was now an infinitely subdued character who never made a single concrete suggestion, and drank his way steadily through each succeeding day. It was not a comfortable household, but at least it had a predetermined protocol which cut mistakes to the minimum.

He observed that Jack Lett, handling the toys and games angle, was making a fortune, both for himself and for the Guild. The Tapalong Club system was an intricate structure, extremely well organized on a world-wide basis: the subscriptions alone, remitted direct to the Guild, were a huge item in the balance-sheet, and the royalties on the sale of uniforms added up to a fantastic total.

He observed that this balance-sheet was a somewhat haphazard affair; though the donations from the Guild to outside charities were substantial, there was an enormous margin left over, undistributed and never allocated to any specific object.

He observed that " expenses " covered a lot of ground, much of it scarcely charitable.

He observed that Esther was not happy: that Mrs. Bannister was never quite free of anxiety: that Captain Bannister did whatever he was told, with a beaten dog's obedience; and that Jack Lett was careful not to identify himself with the various meetings and the " presentation " of Esther, only with the sale of her various brand products. He did, however, put in a certain amount of overtime as Mrs. Bannister's lover.

Barry Grant could not use any of this, but he tried his utmost with the printable material. The tour progressed: New York built up to a legendary triumph; he filed a lot of stories, and messages from Ryan indicated that he was pleased with them.

Then two things happened. They should have cancelled each

other out, but they did not. He found himself suspecting that Esther Costello was a fake. Not just a racket, but a straightforward fake. And he found that he was falling in love with her.

The two things happened side by side: sometimes it was difficult to tell when he was watching Esther with suspicion, and when with love. Love gave him wonder and desire; suspicion gave him three separate items which finally sent him racing home to Boston, ahead of the party, with the hottest news story of the decade.

The first item that pricked his attention was so slight that only afterwards, when he was reviewing his monstrous suspicions, did it make its true weight felt. He had been sitting in the lounge of their hotel suite in New York, with Charles Bannister in the opposite armchair. The time was after lunch, which meant that Bannister was far from sober; the two of them had been talking idly, about the big meeting which was scheduled for a few days ahead, when Esther came into the room.

She looked young and cool in her print dress, and not for the first time Barry Grant found himself appraising her as a woman, instead of a protected human being outside the normal tide of desire. To examine her thus was very agreeable.

When she sat down, smoothing her dress, he winked at Charles Bannister, and said: " She really is a honey, isn't she ? Just look at that figure ! "

Grant would never have said this, if he had not been slightly drunk himself, and surprised by his sudden feeling of attraction for Esther. But the girl really did look beautiful, on that summer afternoon ; her face was studious and beautifully formed, her body graceful, her legs a delight. It seemed to Grant an enormous pity that he could not tell her so himself.

He was very much taken aback to hear Charles Bannister say, in tones of the utmost discomfort: " You oughtn't to talk like that about her ! "

As well as surprising him, it angered Grant to be thus rebuked by this second-rate, drunken hanger-on, and he countered roughly: " What the hell ? She can't hear, can she ? "

The girl, sitting immobile across the room from him, had the grace and the inaccessibility of a marble statue; her useless beauty reproached him, and he was driven beyond what he would normally have said, to Charles Bannister or to anyone else. " What does it matter what I say ? I wish she *could* hear. I'd like to tell her she's got the best-looking body in New York ! "

" That'll do, Grant ! " There was a drunken embarrassment in Charles Bannister's voice that again took him aback. " Just shut up about her, will you ? "

" What's your worry ? " Grant felt like taunting him now. " Not getting jealous, are you ? " He looked again at Esther, at her oval face and composed brow. He thought again: I wish she *could* hear—I'd tell her a thing or two.

"If this is what they mean by a blind date," he said, with appalling crudity, "I'd choose it every time."

"By God!" said Charles Bannister furiously, "I wish I were a few years younger. I'd thrash you for saying that!" As he spoke, Esther rose from her chair, and felt her way out of the room. "You see," said Bannister, watching her exit, nearly beside himself, "you see what you do with your filthy tongue! Why can't you keep quiet?"

Grant stared at him, no longer angry or malicious, but amazed at the sense of his words. None of this added up.

Then, as he looked, he saw a spectacular blush appear on the other man's face, rising above his collar and suffusing his neck, cheeks, and brow in a rich wave of red. He looked like a small boy who has made some violently uncouth noise in church. Thereafter Bannister rose swiftly to his feet, muttered something, and shambled from the room without another word.

They neither of them referred to this occasion again. Grant, indeed, felt rather ashamed of himself: he did not in the least want to talk like that about Esther, even to himself. He supposed that Charles Bannister had the same feeling, and that some queer drunken inconsequence had made him choose the words he did.

The words themselves had not made sense, but the instinct behind them was clear and valid enough. Grant did not think about it again until much later.

The second item concerned himself and Esther alone.

Grant had now taken to studying Esther as closely as he could: he told himself that it was a reporter's interest, he knew it was something like a lover's. He spent as much time as possible alone with her: especially did he enjoy sitting opposite her in the comfortable silence of the suite, watching her reading Braille or doing embroidery at which she was now expert. It gave to their time together a gentle domestic significance which he found very attractive; and in some strange, undefined manner he received the impression that she liked it that way herself.

Indeed, if the idea had not been nonsensical, he would have said that often she was watching him covertly, and enjoying his company as he did hers. Now and then, with no one to hear, he would say aloud: "You're lovely, Esther. I wish I could tell you about it." And as if the thought could communicate itself to her, she seemed to react to his words, and her face would soften to a marvellous sweetness.

Once he said: "I'd like to kiss you. I shall, too, some day." And it was as if she could hear the loving, urgent words, so shyly confused did her whole face and manner become.

One day, after asking Mrs. Bannister to explain the plan to her, he took Esther for a walk, alone, in Central Park. Her hand in his was soft and close; as they strolled along slowly, they might have been normal lovers, normally happy. When they returned to the hotel, Esther passed a message of special thanks to him, using her

sign-language, through Mrs. Bannister. Whenever Grant was there, Esther would not use the frightening, unco-ordinated speech which she now produced for the entertainment of the public.

She then went through to her own room, with Mrs. Bannister by her side. Barry Grant noticed that she had left behind her on the table the small handbag she had been carrying, and with a lover's instinct he picked it up, intending to take it along to her room. But as his fingers closed round it, it slipped from his grasp and dropped to the floor.

It fell open as it hit the ground, and out of it dropped a pair of dark sunglasses.

That night he went to sleep frowning. In his dream, a man, unidentified, whispered to him that Esther could see. He said, astonished: "How do you know that?" and Ryan, appearing suddenly across an enormous desk, answered acidly: "The sunglasses, you dope!"

When he awoke, the resemblance was only shadowy. But it was still there; and with the utmost unwillingness he began to work out what it could mean. His appalled speculation had to battle all the time with his love; but in this case his love—however protective, however increasing—could not win.

The third item was, for him, conclusive proof.

By this time, Barry Grant knew himself to be deeply in love with Esther; and he knew also that he was on the verge of uncovering a monstrous swindle of which she was the centre. It was no longer a battle between loving her, and uncovering this deception of hers: he was now determined that he would love, and uncover, at the same time, and so rescue her from her frightful situation.

He realized, of course, that she could not be innocent in this affair, and must indeed be completely involved in it; but he was convinced in his heart that she must be under constant pressure, from Mrs. Bannister and the others, in all that she was doing.

The third item concerned a mirror.

There was in the hall of the New York hotel suite a mirror of an old-fashioned type, a long cheval glass adjustable to any angle. Once again, Barry Grant had come up from his own room, one floor below, to spend the afternoon with Esther; and as he passed the mirror he moved it, locking it at a new angle so that he could see his whole reflection. Then he went through into the sitting-room.

Presently Esther opened the door and came in. He went up to her, took her arm, and started to guide her towards her chair. Then, when she was settled, he returned to the door in order to close it. Something made him look at the cheval glass again. When he did so, he saw that his head and shoulders were no longer reflected in it: the angle of the mirror had been readjusted to suit a much smaller person.

It must have been moved within the last few moments; and the only person to go anywhere near it had been Esther.

She was, of course, a head shorter than he. In fact, she scarcely came up to his shoulder.

With great care, Barry Grant now chose his moment and his man. It seemed essential for him to clinch his suspicions, by a countercheck within the organization. The man, by a process of elimination, was to be Jack Lett; and the moment, whenever Lett was off his guard. Mrs. Bannister, of course, would never talk; Charles Bannister was hard to get hold of, harder to pin down; and Esther was not the person whom Grant wished to trap.

The opportunity came after Esther's final New York meeting, one of those triumphant occasions which left its sponsors spent and exalted at the same time.

The immediate excitement, the flash-guns and the autographs, gradually died away: by midnight that night, Esther was in bed, Mrs. Bannister safe in her room, and Charles Bannister had got lost in a down-town club and was unlikely to come to the surface before daylight. Only Jack Lett remained; Jack Lett, and Barry Grant, sitting together in the deserted suite, contentedly lowering a bottle of Scotch whisky.

The moment, for Grant, was now propitious, since Jack Lett was more than usually complacent after a profitable finale to their New York stay; and Grant let it run on for a few minutes longer, patiently attentive to the other man, as Jack Lett enlarged on the evening's triumph. The more he talked and the more whisky he downed, the more easily would Grant throw him off balance, when the time came for the surprise question.

Lett was at the very top of his form: confident, bouncing, full of commercial sunshine. He had, that evening, clinched some production deal which guaranteed his future for a long time to come.

" Barry," he said, setting down his half-empty glass, " Barry, there's no ceiling to this thing, at all. You saw them this evening, howling their heads off before the show was halfway through. We signed up over three hundred new Club members at the end of it. That means more uniforms, more badges, more everything." He grinned. " The boys back in California will be working overtime—and they'll be loving every minute of it."

" Very gratifying," said Barry.

" You bet it's gratifying ! " Lett downed the rest of his drink in one prodigious swallow, and began to pour himself another. As usual when he was pleased, he seemed to be outgrowing his clothes, expanding physically as his thoughts soared. Grant wondered what his blood-pressure was.

" She's a wonder, that girl. And Mrs. Bannister too: a fine, devoted woman. Between them they've put blindness on the map —and it's going to stay that way."

" What's the total club membership, now ? "

" It's difficult to say, the way the thing's growing all the time. It must be around the half-million mark, I guess

" You stick around ! Esther will have them all beat, by the end of next year. Yes, sir ! " he repeated: " She certainly has put blindness on the map."

He raised his glass. In the moment of silence, Grant said: " How long has she been able to see ? "

Jack Lett, who was drinking (as Grant had intended him to be) when the question hit him, gulped wildly at his glass, upsetting half of it over his coat. His eyes bulged, as if the pressure of whisky had been forced up directly behind them. His face, never very healthy, took on a greenish tinge. Then he set down his glass, with a shaking hand, not bothering to mop up what he had spilt, and said: " You must be crazy ! " His voice was a ludicrous, whispering parody of its normal tone; all bluff, all bounce, all confidence had been knocked out of it.

" What do you mean, *how long* ? Esther *can't* see."

" How long ? " said Grant. " I'm just asking *that*."

Jack Lett stared at him, his face blurred with doubt and indecision. It was easy to read his mind. He could not guess exactly how much Barry Grant knew; but it was enough that the one central fact had been confidently voiced. If that item could thus be thrown into the ring, then all their swindling world must be falling in ruins. But he tried once more, feebly.

" You're way off the track, Barry." His voice had a politician's lilt. " Esther's as blind as—as Charles Bannister, right at this moment."

Barry Grant looked at him. It was a look of complete loathing and disbelief, and it gave the other man no margin for denial, no shadow of hope.

" I *know*," Grant said at last. " Get that, and cut the crap. I *know*. How long has she been able to see ? "

Jack Lett, swallowing, said: " Since London."

There was a long silence. Barry Grant, watching this defeated man who had so easily surrendered, was conscious not of victory but of a sick disgust at what he had learned. So it *was* true, all that he had suspected—the whole thing *was* a swindle, and Esther *was* a liar, double-dyed, inhumanly dishonest. But of course she must have been cruelly forced.

" What happened in London ? " he asked finally, when the harrowing silence had stretched far beyond his choice.

" I don't know at all," answered Jack Lett. The question told him of an essential gap in Grant's knowledge, and he now made a swift effort of recovery, raising fresh defences as fast as his slick brain and weasel tongue could work. " Some accident, I guess. I only learned about it a lot later. You know me, Barry—I just sell the toys and the uniforms. I'm not part of the main organization at all," he continued briskly—and Barry Grant wanted to sock him for it. " The meetings are nothing to do with me. Just the

toys—that's my line. There's never been any guarantee from them about Esther being blind, has there ?"

Lett was now accumulating a horrible jaunty self-confidence, drawing round him the chips of his cast-iron assurance. "What's the difference, anyway ? We're making money for the blind, aren't we ?"

He saw that Barry Grant had risen, and he rose too, his face derisive and yet quailing at the same time. "We're all in it together—*you're* in it, too . . . Get wise to that, Barry: you make money, writing all that stuff about it—and you're another one who'd like to lay her, aren't you ? . . . I was getting out, anyway," he said, suddenly fearful, falling back a swift step as he saw Grant's expression. "I've made my dough. I'm satisfied."

"You swine," said Barry Grant. He was cool now, and the hand that reached out to grasp Jack Lett's collar was cool, and the clenched fist that hit the other man full on the mouth was especially cool, cool with fury, coolly accurate. Lett's lips glowed suddenly crimson, and he fell back cursing; and the cool fist caught him again, between his ear and his streaming jaw, and he toppled backwards, senseless before he hit the ground.

Though the room was suddenly cleaner, because Lett was no longer in it, in any active sense, Grant had a moment of flaming anger, of fury that Esther had been entrapped (as she must have been) by so swinish a gang. Then, since there was nothing left for him to hit, he relaxed, and his arm fell to his side again.

It stayed there only for a moment, until he turned, attracted by a new sound. This time it was the door. It opened awkwardly, and Charles Bannister appeared, framed within it like a blotchy painting of a man in evening dress.

He was clearly drunk, but that was not going to matter. That was just his bad luck.

Grant advanced towards him. "*You* bastard," he said softly.

"Extraordinary remark to make," said Charles Bannister owlishly. His eyes swivelled round, took in Lett's still form on the ground, rose again with foolish surprise. "I must say——" he began, but that was not a sentence he ever finished. Grant's fist caught him flush on the chin, and he collapsed backwards, like an elegant sack whose outlines had suddenly melted into rags.

Barry Grant stepped over them both, and made for the outer door. The whole suite was now very silent, as if waiting for his next move.

He did not know what that was to be. He found that he was still shaking with rage. He was far too angry to work any of it out, too confused and shocked to decide what to do.

"Tomorrow," he said, addressing the air outside the suite, haranguing the elevator. "Tomorrow. Wait until tomorrow. Then I'll break the whole story."

Grant could never decide why he did *not* break the whole story next day, or what it was that sent him to Boston,

on the midday plane, instead of filing the full account of what he had discovered, from New York. All his normal newspaper instinct urged him to send the story then and there: all his second thoughts—crowding in on him even as he walked down the single flight of stairs to his hotel room—told him to delay.

There were many such thoughts, many conflicting reasons for waiting. Lying awake that night, and watching the dawn through the curtains later, he tried to sort them out.

Perhaps he was delaying because it was too big a story to handle, without direct consultation at headquarters. It was not that he wanted to throw the whole thing in Ryan's lap: he really felt he needed the older man's comment and criticism, his sustaining presence, before he made up his mind how it should appear in print.

Perhaps it was because he was ashamed of his behaviour, and wanted to put a distance between himself and the night's crude action. Violence could never be the answer, to anything: it was satisfactory to have clipped Jack Lett so squarely on the jaw, and pleasing (as a neat, back-handed piece of repartee is pleasing) to have rounded it off with a complementary poke at Charles Bannister. But the physical acts did not settle anything, they disposed of nothing save the immediate urge to express his disgust. The whole thing needed dealing with on quite another plane.

Perhaps it was something queer that had gone astray, something in Jack Lett's phrase about " laying," which continued to nag him, and made him want to clear a space for thought. There was one single word—he could not remember which—that remained stuck in his brain; an object in cloudy aspic, too deep to be distinguished. He felt he could not write the full story until he remembered it.

Perhaps it was his love for Esther that stopped him filing the story immediately: his emerging, protective love that wanted above everything to shield her from the tremendous scandal he was about to unloose. A little delay could do no harm; and it might clarify her position, presenting it in a new and innocent light.

How fearful, how vile, if he wrote a straightforward piece about the swindle, with Esther as the wicked centre of it, and then found that he had overlooked some angle which explained or even cancelled her part in it.

He could not think what such an angle could be; but it *might* be there. For his peace of mind, indeed, it must be.

Perhaps the real reason was Mrs. Bannister, next morning.

Barry Grant had spent much of the war in the Navy; and now a phrase from that war—*Close watertight doors*—returned irresistibly to mock him. For, next morning all safety doors had been slammed, all clips screwed home: the ship, mortally hit, was putting up an atavistic struggle for survival. Next morning, when he came up to the suite, prowling for facts, intent on straightening things out, he found himself completely blanked off from all further contact.

First, Jack Lett had disappeared. " Gone back West," said

the floor-waiter, an old friend of Grant's who had the habit of gossip. "Took the first plane out. Big contract coming up, I reckon." Then, Charles Bannister had gone to hospital—"for a thorough check-up," said his personal valet, and added caustically: "Not a day too soon, either."

Then, Esther was incommunicado, held behind locked doors over which Mrs. Bannister's secretary stood guard. "She's not well at all," said the latter, an earnest, negative woman, who travelled everywhere with them. "Mrs. Bannister wants her to rest. She can't see anyone, I'm afraid."

Finally, there was Mrs. Bannister herself. Grant met her in the same big sitting-room where he had had the late-night session with Jack Lett: the room, now sunny, was purged of its overnight shocks and shadows, neutral in this sordid battle. He stood up as she came in—and while she was still halfway towards him, it became crystal clear that, before he flew back to Hollywood, Jack Lett must have talked. Here, the watertight door had slammed shut on a direct order from the bridge.

"She's not well, Barry," Mrs. Bannister repeated, when he asked to see Esther. There was an arrogant finality in her voice which marked a new stage in their relationship. "I don't want her to meet anyone."

"I'll bet you don't," he answered—but he did not speak aloud. There was a temptation to lay all cards upon the table, but he could not quite bring himself to do so. He looked at Mrs. Bannister—at this smooth, tough, competent woman who was surely the mainspring of the whole horrible racket.

On her appearance, he could not fault her: she was as well turned out, as well made up, as well presented as she had ever been. She looked as though she knew she was actively enjoying this warm summer morning: enjoying it because she knew she could handle it, and him, and everything else, with complete, exclusive authority.

Only her eyes, which seemed to notice every move and take account of every shadow, had a jungle awareness which betrayed her fear.

"Where's everybody?" Grant asked.

Mrs. Bannister smiled briefly, a smile so mirthless and so brittle it might have cracked the corners of her mouth.

"Still asleep, I guess," she answered. "You know what these big meetings are like."

"I wanted a follow-up story on last night."

"It'll keep. Why not take a walk, Barry? Fresh air will do you good."

"Can I see Esther after lunch?"

"Maybe. But I want her to have a real long sleep. Tomorrow would be better."

They were staring at each other now: wary, circling like animals that fear the final grapple. Grant remembered his crude words of last night—"I *know*—cut out the crap—I *know*"—and they were

on the edge of his tongue again; but he could not use them, could not take the plunge into the mire. He wanted to think, he wanted to talk to Ryan.

He said, instead: "O.K., then—see you later," and made for the door. He felt and walked like a retreating coward.

Mrs. Bannister watched him all the way, steel-eyed, as if a single false step would be his doom, and her finger were poised over the button. It was a relief to have the closed door as a shield for his back.

Grant walked out of the hotel as he was, leaving his baggage and his room intact, and drove to La Guardia, and caught the noon plane for Boston.

Ryan, the news-editor of the *Star-Telegram*, did not blink an eyelid while Grant told him his story. He was not surprised at what he heard: he had not been surprised for thirty years: he had lost the capacity. Surprise was for other people—for the *readers* of newspapers. Of course, he believed instantly what Barry Grant was telling him. He believed, firstly, because he trusted Grant and knew he was a good newspaperman. But principally he believed his story because it was the sort of thing that was always true.

Of *course* Esther Costello could see, hear, and speak. That was what people who collected vast sums of money on the plea of being blind, deaf, and dumb, could inevitably do. Such things were part of the human pattern: the things that made up a front page.

Barry Grant's news, though promising, was nothing out of the way. Except, of course, as a story: in that category, it was a good one, though it still needed readying.

He said: "We'll have to have a lot more facts, before we can print."

Grant nodded. Obscurely, it was the answer he had been hoping to hear: it relieved him of responsibility for not filing the story straight away, it made sense of his hesitation. Of course, the story needed more facts to support it. But for honour's sake he had to argue the point.

"Surely we've got enough to go on. The spectacles, the mirror, Jack Lett's confession——"

"Lett won't testify," Ryan interrupted. "I know these smart operators—and so do you. They're like bookies. Try to put them on the witness stand, and they're three states away, under a different name and a false beard, before the case comes up."

"But I can testify to what he said."

Ryan smiled. "You're a reporter," he said. "A man with a story to sell to the public. You're the biggest suspect of all."

"Suppose we run the story, and let them climb out of it. I know—*we* know—that they can't."

Ryan shook his head. Across the desk, he looked like a rock of sanity—a disbelieving rock. "Not for this newspaper," he said, after a moment. "The editor doesn't like it, and I don't like it, either. If you print news that way, you can print anything."

"But this story's true."

"Sure. We just want proof. Proof that no one can knock down."

"What sort of proof?" Grant knew, even as he asked the question, what Ryan would answer.

"There's only one sort of proof, Barry. The girl herself. You'll have to go back to New York, and get the story from Esther."

"She won't be on view."

Ryan smiled again, sardonically. "You're on the *Star-Telegram* —and this time it works a different way. You've *got* to get her story, somehow. Find a way. Phone her up—bribe the secretary—knock Mrs. Bannister out—hide under the bed. You know the story's there. Go out and get it."

"They're due here in Boston, in three days' time."

"So much the better. Wait here for them. Catch them on their home ground."

Grant was astonished to hear his own voice saying: "I'm hoping she's innocent."

There was a long silence in the office. Across the desk, Ryan's strong square face below the crew-cut grey hair was devoid of expression. Finally he said: "Innocent is a big word. It's the biggest there is. It'll need to be, in this case."

"I mean," said Grant, with difficulty, "I hope she's been doing all this because she was forced to."

"Me too. But ask her. She'll talk to you." Ryan's eyes flickered upwards suddenly. "Won't she?"

Grant felt himself blushing vividly. "I reckon so."

The news-editor nodded again. "There's always an angle." But the words were not cynical: they sounded, indeed, like an attempt at comfort. Ryan was sitting back now, at ease, understanding, immensely human. "It's a great story, Barry," he said gently. "We want to do it *just* right."

How to see her? Barry Grant, sitting in an air-cooled bar on Tremont Street, on the day that Esther Costello was due to return to Boston, had still not found the answer to his problem. There were too many things in the way: too many facts, and too many thoughts. Esther would be living at the Commonwealth Avenue apartment: she would be guarded with triple vigilance by Mrs. Bannister, who must guess that he would be back in Boston himself; and she might be unwilling to see him anyway.

He recalled, with prickling shame, some of the things he had said to Esther, aloud, when he thought she could not hear. There had been something about a good-looking body, something about kissing. It could well be that she would be scared of him for that reason, leaving out of account the fact that he planned to expose her.

He had had some vague idea of "rescuing" her. Suppose she did not want to be rescued, by him or anyone else, and in fact looked on him as an enemy?

Suppose he were his own enemy as well? He had got on to a

good story: the best that had ever come his way. If he broke it, he would break Esther as well. He loved her, and there was a war going on inside his head, a war of love against the story. He knew that the story would win, because he was that sort of man, in that sort of job. But the contest was a near thing, and he hoped with all his soul that the story might somehow be published without shaming and destroying Esther.

Ryan had had the same idea. In spite of his tough armour, Ryan was a man of compassion; and when he had said: "We want to do it just right," that had been one of the things he had meant. If it were humanly possible, he wanted Grant to break the story, and rescue and absolve Esther at the same time. It could be done—but only if she had become party to this fraud because of some unspeakable duress. It was tied up with that missing word, the buried motive that he could only discover by talking to Esther.

He turned to the bar again, and ordered another drink. Then the door swung open, and a man walked in, unsteadily: a middle-aged, sagging man with a face as rumpled as his suit. It was someone Grant knew well—Al Stevens, the *Star-Telegram's* staff drunk. By the look of him, he was not out of character, at that moment.

Grant said: "Hi, Al," and Al Stevens blinked at him, and answered, for some reason: "Shame on you Barry." It fitted in so well with what Grant himself was thinking that he felt his face flushing. But it was only old Al Stevens aiming at some target within his own muddled head.

"Have a drink, Al," he said uncomfortably.

"Too early," answered Stevens, and almost in the same breath, to the barman: "Two Scotch. On the rocks."

The drinks slid deftly across the counter: two tumblers, ice-filled, two jiggers of whisky, a glass of water for a chaser. Stevens raised his, sucked half of it down, and blinked at Barry again. "Cheer up, kid! You're still on the pay-roll, aren't you? What's new?"

"Nothing much." Grant, sipping his drink, stared at Al Stevens. He liked the other man, but he hoped he would never come to match him. This was where you ended up, if you drank too much and fell down on your assignments. Stevens had fallen down once, years ago, spectacularly: he had become tangled up with a girl in London, and had missed a possible scoop. He had got drunk to cure it, and had been the same way ever since. Barry Grant hoped he would never fall down on a story like that.

He had such a story now—and such a girl as well.

Stevens knocked back the rest of his drink, and hammered on the bar. "Two Scotch, my good man," he said to the barman. The barman, pouring the fresh drinks, winked at Barry. No one ever got sore with Al Stevens. It had ensured his ruin.

"You were in New York," said Stevens, out of the blue.

" Yes. Esther Costello." It was difficult now to pronounce her name simply. " Just got back."

" Swell girl," said Stevens vaguely. Then he frowned, at some unrelated thought. " They were talking about a big robbery, back in the news-room."

Grant nodded. " Sure. Some old dame at Cambridge. Jack Owen's covering it. Man walked up the fire-escape while the family were at dinner, emptied the old girl's jewel-box, walked right down again. Not a clue, not a print. About twenty thousand dollars' worth of stuff."

" She was too rich, anyway . . . It beats me why that sort of thing doesn't happen more often." Stevens looked around him: the bar, deserted, was very silent, the air-cooling system humming gently. " Anyone," he said—and to Barry Grant his voice seemed to come from a long way away—" anyone living in one of those old houses, with a fire-escape at the back, is asking for trouble."

Barry Grant parked his car up the Avenue, a block away from Mrs. Bannister's apartment building, and settled down to wait.

It was eight o'clock, and getting towards dusk. He might have to move nearer to the front entrance, when it grew dark; but for the moment, he would see clearly enough if Mrs. Bannister left the apartment. There was no reason why she should leave tonight—their train from New York had got in at six, and the household might now simply go to bed; but she *could* go out, for a late dinner or a visit to a friend. If not, he would have to try again next day.

He dared not attempt the fire-escape route, up to the third floor and Esther's own room, unless Esther were alone in the house. He was taking a big chance even then, but there was no other way of finding her alone. If Mrs. Bannister went out for any reason, she would be sure to lock her front door. The fire-escape, leading up to the Bannister apartment—one of six in the small block—was all that was left.

He waited. The traffic thickened up for the late movies, then slacked off again. It grew darker: the street lamps came on, and the couples walking along the Avenue—advancing from one pool of light to another, like men cautiously stalking a hilltop—quickened their pace instead of strolling. The clock on the dashboard moved slowly: nine o'clock, a quarter-past, half-past. At 9.45, stiff and cramped with waiting, Barry Grant moved his car half a block nearer the entrance.

Almost immediately, Mrs. Bannister came down the front steps, paused under a lamp, then got into a blue-grey car (which Grant now recognized as hers) and drove off down Commonwealth Avenue towards the centre of town.

Grant's throat went dry as he watched the bright gleaming tail-light fade and then vanish: for a long time he could not move, though his brain was urging him, with a " Now—now—" like a hammering pulse. Again it was the war that was closely recalled:

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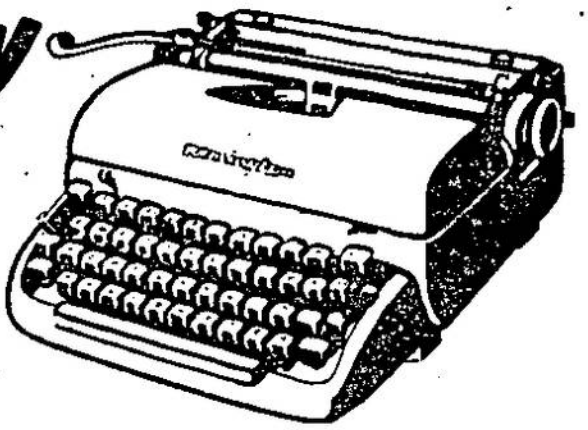

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the sudden thickening in the throat that meant zero-hour, and the need to set course for the beaches, with no more cover, no more excuse for delay.

Swallowing his fear, Grant got out of his car. In those bad old days, he had always forced himself to think: before another five minutes have passed, I'll be there, and it will all be over—the beaching, the scythe of lead aiming at my guts, the promise of murder: I've just got to exist for the next five minutes. Now he thought: round the block into the parallel street at the back, up three flights of iron steps, and I shall have landed on *this* beach.

He turned his back on the brightly-lit entrance, and walked steadily for the corner and the beginning of the narrow street that ran behind the apartment block. A few minutes later, breathing fast, he had traversed the paved garden masking the service entrance to the apartments, and his foot was on the first step of the fire-escape.

There were lights within the building, all the way up: the rusty iron ladder zigzagged across the centre of it, with a small platform at each stage: to the right of every platform was a kitchen, to the left a back bedroom. Each lighted window beckoned his eyes irresistibly. At ground level, he saw a man stooping over the refrigerator in the kitchen, and a couple, negligently dressed, kissing in the bedroom. Now there's a situation, he thought, stepping upwards past the static, dubious tableau: in that set-up, who is married to whom? Is that the husband who is hungry, while the lovers grab a quick chance?—or is it the lover who waits his turn, and meantime settles for a cold cut?

He would never know.

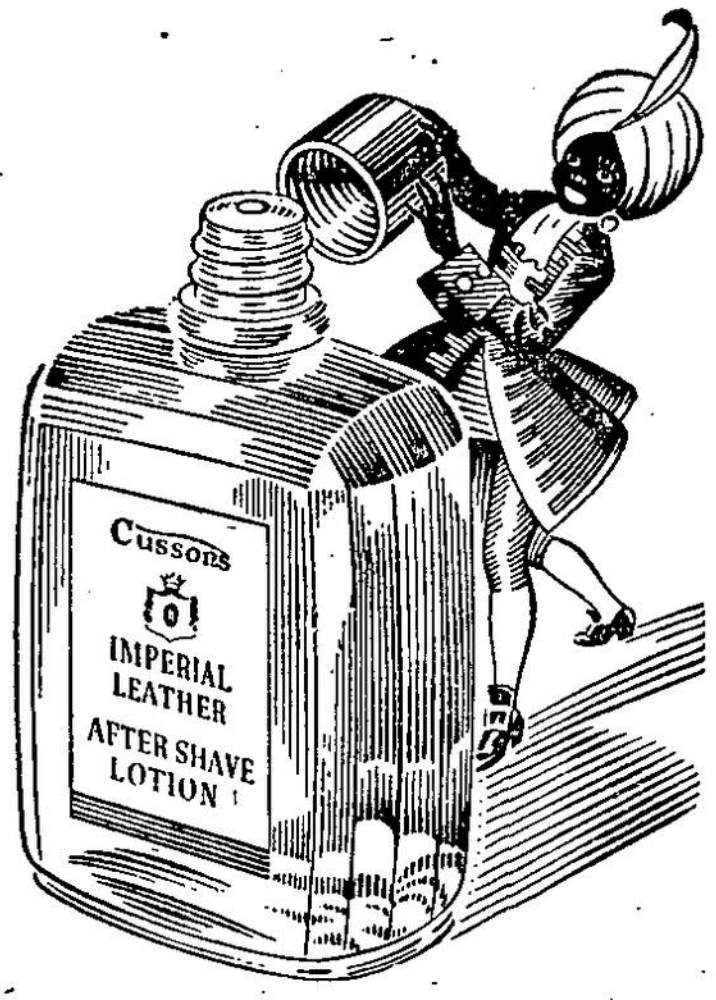
His steps, agreeably firm, almost brave, carried him upwards, to the next floor. His throat went dry again as the mounting steps turned for the last half-flight: his head came level with the back of the Bannister apartment, then he stood in silence, conscious of his thudding heart, on the small platform outside the kitchen door.

All was in darkness, save for another glass-framed door which he knew to be the entrance to Esther's bedroom, at the far end of the platform. He inched his way along the railed space, giddy with the height and the black void beneath him, and peered round the edge of the lighted door.

He saw Esther immediately. She was sitting in an armchair, half turned towards him, reading. Her eyes, of course, were open, and attentive to the printed page.

It seemed to Grant that he would shame them both if he delayed in watching her. With love and pity in his curled knuckles, he tapped on the glass of the door and, turning the handle, stepped within her room.

At the sound of the opening door Esther had raised her head slightly, though not enough to meet his eyes: now she froze, going through a routine which was horrible and moving at the same time. Barry Grant had never seen a person become blind and deaf before, but this was what Esther did: immensely wary, like



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an animal alerted by a sudden noise, she seemed to retreat within her own body, drawing over herself a hood of impotence.

The book dropped to her lap: her head took on a wooden fixity, and her eyes the cloudy film of night. She was no longer a lovely girl, reading a book in a warm room. She was Esther Costello.

Barry Grant, seeing her thus forfeit all her life at one glacial stroke, found himself trembling, with fear and shame. What had they done to her, that she could have come to accept such imprisonment?

He took a pace forward, standing above her chair, and said: "It's all right, Esther—I know."

She did not stir. He had not thought that she would, at one single sentence from himself: the armour of her pretence was now too much a part of her. He leant over, and touched her arm above the elbow. He had feared that she would carry the fraud another step, and produce a sudden stagey start. But she did not move at all.

It was enough for him: it told him that she had given up. He said again: "It's all right, Esther. Jack Lett talked. I *know*."

Esther raised her head slowly. As she did so, she seemed to melt back into womanhood again: her eyes, focusing honestly on his for the very first time, had a depth and grace that went straight to his heart, and her whole face was lit with yielding tenderness.

She said: "Thank God, Barry," and, rising, went directly into his arms.

Everything was to be for the first time. It was the first time he had heard her natural voice, which was low and gentle: it was the first time he had touched her body, which was a young delight. Holding her close, feeling her tremble and then cease to tremble, waiting for her to raise her lips to his, he had only one single, thankful thought.

He was lucky. There were enormous, fantastic complications to every aspect of this. But he was very lucky.

Her mouth came up, meeting his gently. It must be the first time for her, he thought, conscious at once of the shy assent of her lips. How warmly, how sweetly she does it.

Then Esther drew back, and smiled, and murmured: "You *said* you were going to kiss me."

He grinned ruefully. "I must have said a lot of things . . . Oh, Esther, you're so lovely . . . What have they done to you?"

"I'll tell you. It's wonderful to be able to talk to you."

"It's wonderful to hear it. Your voice is—is like singing." He kissed her again. "I said I was going to kiss you. I didn't know it would be like this."

"I used to wonder what happened to the noses. Your arms are so strong," she went on softly. "I never felt arms before."

"Really never?"

Turning slightly from him, she said: "Why did you ask that?"

He was momentarily confused by some wariness in her voice,

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and in the feel of her body. "No reason. Because you're so lovely, I suppose."

"Then you *don't* know?"

"Know what?"

She seemed to be sinking her head lower on his chest, as if afraid of their eyes meeting. Her voice, no longer confident, was suddenly troubled and tense. "That I should have said: 'I never felt arms before. Except.'"

"Except what?" he asked, puzzled when she stopped on the single word.

"Except what I have to tell you." There was something in her tone that was like a cold breath entering the room. He knew then that she was on the verge of an appalling revelation—that this was the missing word, leering at them both over the near horizon. He did not want to know about it—he only wanted to hold her and kiss her. But that was not to be their pattern.

"What did they do to you?" he asked again.

"All things."

Barry noticed, as she spoke, that Esther still had a trace of brogue in her voice. It had outlived and survived ten years of silence, as everything about her—her loveliness, her warmth and softness—had outlived the horror of her infirmity.

"We can talk now," said Esther, bravely determined, her head coming up again. "She's out—some welcome-home party or other. There are things you have to know."

"But why did you do it, Esther? Why did you pretend? And what happened? You *were* blind, weren't you?"

"Oh yes, I was blind and deaf and dumb. Then there was a—a shock."

"What sort of shock?"

He was watching her closely, holding her at arm's length, and he saw creeping into her face a tide of shame and distress that almost answered him. Immediately something clicked into place—the forgotten phrase that Jack Lett had used. Jack Lett had said, coarsely: "You're another one who'd like to lay her." *Another*—that was the word he had been groping for, ever since.

He said: "My God, Esther . . ."

She nodded. "It was force," she said.

"Who?"

"Bannister himself."

"When? In London?"

"Yes." He was confused and appalled: he had the key now, but the key was filthy and ugly, and would not turn for him. "But what happened after? When did the pretending start?"

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"I'll tell you." Esther drew away from him and sat down on the bed, motioning to him to join her. She was grave now, and pale: her eyes held his urgently, as if she were praying that he would listen, and believe, and forgive. "It's a long story, Barry. There's plenty of blame in it—blame for me, and for him, and for her. But I thought I was doing right."

"I love you anyway," he said, touching her hand again. "Love you and believe in you."

"That's good to know."

"Now tell me."

So, trustfully, with no more hesitation, she began to tell Barry Grant her story.

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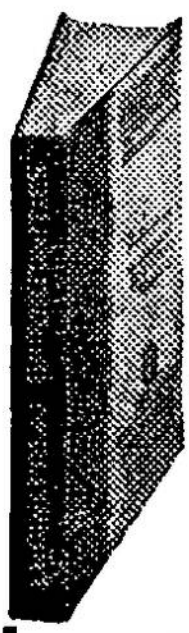

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Rules of Entry on page 104

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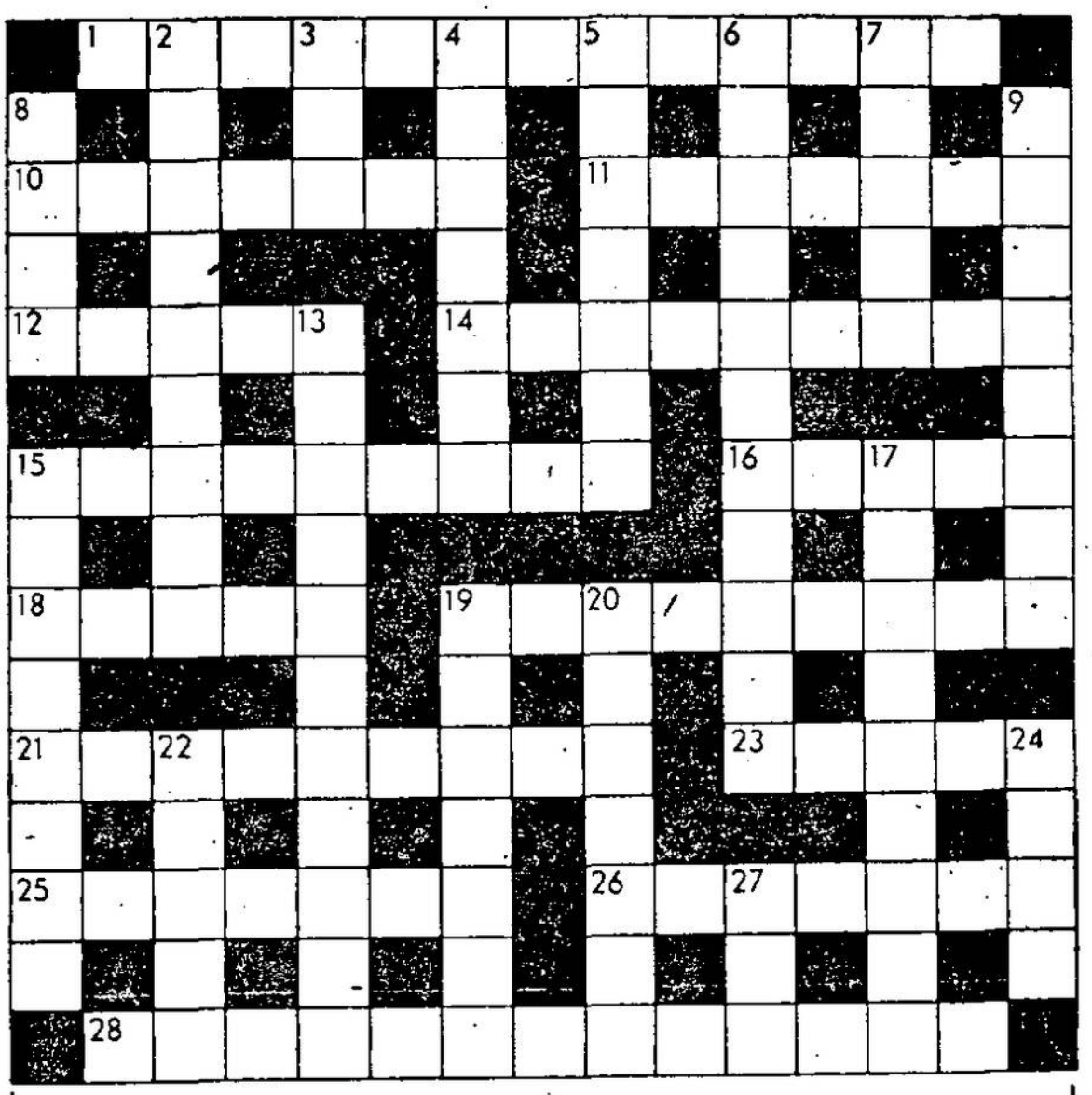

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CUT ALONG THIS LINE

CLUE

Across

1 You'd never think that it was composed by a German (6, 7).

10 Anna swallows half a score and develops a feeler (7).

11 Jovian but hardly jovial attribute (7).

12 An article brings *Bohème*'s heroine to a Florida resort (5).

14 A tough bunch of journalists, perhaps (5-4).

15 Satan seems to be a coy devil (4-5).

16 Bordered — with something sharp, possibly (5).

18 She was a constant nymph (5).

19 These wouldn't be much use on the cricket-field (5-4).

21 "Send up Unity, Claribel, Assyrian, —— and Golden Gain" (Kipling) (9).

23 Haggard horseman (5).

25 How a hunting woman is dressed? (7).

26 Both canoes and steamers may have them (7).

28 A Quaker going to law? He might be useful (6, 2, 5).

Down

2 At least one of these ways in is fascinating (9).

3 More popular in the theatre than in hosiery, especially when long! (3).

4 Formerly enough? It's something to copy (7).

5 "Loved and still loves, —— —— but gone before" (Rogers) (3, 4).

6 You will find that this sort of orator is certain to make himself heard on the air (11).

7 Add up to the north-east for an unfaithful operatic wife (5).

8 A tree in the hand? (4).

9 A ship's in the forefront of these military units (8).

13 Take a film man to Elba and the result's highly combustible (11).

15 There are more temperaments of this sort than abilities (8).

17 Glad lunar mix-up is organic (9).

19 Copy-books should never be (7).

20 Black mark for a writer (7).

22 Take a thousand from a parent: it leaves you an alternative (5).

24 The flower got out of bed, evidently (4).

27 This pair are likely to be seen on a music-hall stage (3).

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